MOUNT ROYAL

M·E·BRADDON

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The Author's Edition

MOUNT ROYAL

NOVELS BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

Lady Audley's Secret.
Henry Dunbar.
Eleanor's Victory.
Aurora Floyd.
John Marchmont's Legacy.
The Doctor's Wife.
Only a Clod.
Sir Jasper's Tenant.
Trail of the Serpent.
The Lady's Mile.
Lady Lisle.
Captain of the Vulture.
Birds of Prey.
Charlotte's Inheritance.
Rupert Godwin.
Run to Earth.
Dead Sea Fruit.
Ralph the Bailiff.
Fenton's Quest.
Lovels of Arden.
Robert Ainsleigh.
To the Bitter End.
Milly Darrell.
Strangers and Pilgrims.
Lucius Davoren.
Taken at the Flood.
Lost for Love.
A Strange World.
Hostages to Fortune.
Dead Men's Shoes.
Joshua Haggard.
Weavers and Weft.
An Open Verdict.
Vixen.
The Cloven Foot.
The Story of Barbara.
Just as I am.
Asphodel.
Mount Royal.
The Golden Calf.
Phantom Fortune.
Flower and Weed.
Ishmael.
Wyllard's Weird.
Under the Red Flag.
One Thing Needful.
Mohawks.
Like and Unlike.
The Fatal Three.
The Day will come.
One Life, One Love.
Gerard.
The Venetians.
All along the River.
Thou art the Man.
The Christmas Hirelings.
Sons of Fire.
London Pride.
Under Love's Rule.
Rough Justice.
In High Places.
His Darling Sin.
The Infidel.
The Conflict.
A Lost Eden.
The Rose of Life.
The White House.
Her Convict.
Dead Love has Chains.
During Her Majesty's Pleasure.
Our Adversary.
Beyond These Voices.
The Green Curtain.
Miranda.

MOUNT ROYAL

BY

M. E. BRADDON

Author of "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN,"
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CHAPTER I.

THE DAYS THAT ARE NO MORE.

'AND he was a widower,' said Christabel.

She was listening to an oft-told tale, kneeling in the firelight, at her aunt's knee, the ruddy glow tenderly touching her fair soft hair and fairer forehead, her big blue eyes lifted lovingly to Mrs. Tregonell's face.

'And he was a widower, Aunt Diana,' she repeated, with an expression of distaste, as if something had set her teeth on edge. 'I cannot help wondering that you could care for a widower—a man who had begun life by caring for somebody else.'

'Do you suppose any one desperately in love ever thinks of the past?' asked another voice out of the twilight. 'Those infatuated creatures called lovers are too happy and contented with the rapture of the present.'

'One would think you had tremendous experience, Jessie, by the way you lay down the law,' said Christabel, laughing. 'But I want to know what Auntie has to say about falling in love with a widower.'

'If you had ever seen him and known him, I don't think you would wonder at my liking him,' answered Mrs. Tregonell, lying back in her armchair, and talking of the story of her life in a placid way, as if it were the plot of a novel, so thoroughly does time smooth the rough edge of grief. 'When he came to my father's house, his young wife had been dead just two years—she died three days after the birth of her first child—and Captain Hamleigh was very sad and grave, and seemed to take very little pleasure in life. It was in the shooting season, and the other men were out upon the hills all day.'

'Murdering innocent birds,' interjected Christabel. 'How I hate them for it!'

'Captain Hamleigh hung about the house, not seeming to know very well what to do with himself, so your mother and I took pity upon him, and tried to amuse him, which effort resulted in his amusing us, for he was ever so much cleverer than we were. He was so kind and sympathetic. We had just founded a Dorcas Society, and we were muddling hopelessly in an endeavour to make good sensible rules, so that we should do nothing to lessen the independent feeling of our people—and he came to our rescue, and took the whole thing in hand, and seemed to understand it all as thoroughly as if he had been establishing Dorcas Societies all his life. My father said it was because the Captain had been sixth wrangler, and that it was the higher mathematics which made him so clever at making rules. But Clara and I said it was his kind heart that made him so quick at understanding how to help the poor without humiliating them.'

'It was very nice of him,' said Christabel, who had heard the story a hundred times before, but who was never weary of it, and had a special reason for being interested this afternoon. 'And so he stayed a long time at my grandfather's, and you fell in love with him?'

'I began by being sorry for him,' replied Mrs. Tregonell. 'He told us all about his young wife—how happy they had been—how their one year of wedded life seemed to him like a lovely dream. They had only been engaged three months; he had known her less than a year and a half altogether; had come home from India; had seen her at a friend's house, fallen in love with her, married her, and lost her within those eighteen months. 'Everything smiled upon us,' he said. 'I ought to have remembered Polycrates and his ring.'

'He must have been rather a doleful person,' said Christabel, who had all the exacting ideas of early youth in relation to love and lovers. 'A widower of that kind ought to perform suttee, and make an end of the business, rather than go about the world prosing to nice girls. I wonder more and more that you could have cared for him.' And then, seeing her aunt's eyes shining with unshed tears, the girl laid her sunny head upon the matronly shoulder, and murmured tenderly, 'Forgive me for teasing you, dear, I am only pretending. I love to hear about Captain Hamleigh; and I am not very much surprised that you ended by loving him—or that he soon forgot his brief dream of bliss with the other young lady, and fell desperately in love with you.'

'It was not till after Christmas that we were engaged,' continued Mrs. Tregonell, looking dreamily at the fire. 'My father was delighted—so was my sister Clara—your dear mother. Everything went pleasantly; our lives seemed all sunshine. I ought to have remembered Polycrates, for I knew Schiller's ballad about him by heart. But I could think of nothing beyond that perfect all-sufficing happiness. We were not to be married till late in the autumn, when it would be three years since his wife's death. It was my father's wish that I should not be married till after my nineteenth birthday, which would not be till September. I was so happy in my engagement, so confident in my lover's fidelity, that I was more than content to wait. So all that spring he stayed at Penlee. Our mild climate had improved his health, which was not at all good when he came to us—indeed he had retired from the service before his marriage, chiefly on account of weak health. But he spoke so lightly and confidently about himself in this matter, that it had never entered into my head to feel any serious alarm about him, till early in May, when he and Clara and I were caught in a drenching rainstorm during a mountaineering expedition on Rough Tor, and then had to walk four or five miles in the rain before we came to the inn where the carriage was to wait for us. Clara and I, who were always about in all weathers, were very little worse for the wet walk and the long drive home in damp clothes. But George was seriously ill for three weeks with cough and low fever; and it was at this time that our family doctor told my father that he would not give much for his future son-in-law's life. There was a marked tendency to lung complaint, he said; Captain Hamleigh had confessed that several members of his family had died of consumption. My father told me this—urged me to avoid a marriage which must end in misery to me, and was deeply grieved when I declared that no such consideration would induce me to break my engagement, and to grieve the man I loved. If it were needful that our marriage should be delayed, I was contented to submit to any delay; but nothing could loosen the tie between me and my dear love.'

Aunt and niece were both crying now. However familiar the story might he, they always wept a little at this point.

'George never knew one word of this conversation between my father and me—he never suspected our fears—but from that hour my happiness was gone. My life was one perpetual dread—one ceaseless strugle to hide all anxieties and fears under a smile. George rallied, and seemed to grow strong again—was full of energy and high spirits, and I had to pretend to think him as thoroughly recovered as he fancied himself. But by this time I had grown sadly wise. I had questioned our doctor—had looked into medical books—and I knew every sad sign and token of decay. I knew what the flushed cheek and the brilliant eye, the damp cold hand, and the short cough meant. I knew that the hand of death was on him whom I loved more than all the world besides. There was no need for the postponement of our marriage. In the long bright days of August he seemed wonderfully well—as well as he had been before the attack in May. I was almost happy; for, in spite of what the doctor had told me, I began to hope! but early in September, while the dressmakers were in the house making my wedding clothes, the end came suddenly, unexpectedly, with only a few hours' warning. Oh, Christabel! I cannot speak of that day!'

'No, darling, you shall not, you must not,' cried Christabel, showering kisses on her aunt's pale cheek.

'And yet you always lead her on to talk about Captain Hamleigh,' said the sensible voice out of the shadow. 'Isn't that just a little inconsistent of our sweet Belle?'

'Don't call me your 'sweet Belle'—as if I were a baby,' exclaimed the girl. 'I know I am inconsistent—I was born foolish, and no one has ever taken the trouble to cure me of my folly. And now, Auntie dear, tell me about Captain Hamleigh's son—the boy who is coming here to-morrow.'

'I have not seen him since he was at Eton. The Squire drove me down on a Fourth of June to see him.'

'It was very good of Uncle Tregonell.'

'The Squire was always good,' replied Mrs. Tregonell, with a dignified air. Christabel's only remembrance of her uncle was of a large loud man, who blustered and scolded a good deal, and frequently contrived, perhaps, without meaning it, to make everybody in the house uncomfortable; so she reflected inwardly upon that blessed dispensation which, however poorly wives may think of living husbands, provides that every widow should consider her departed spouse completely admirable.

'And was he a nice a boy in those days?' asked Christabel, keenly interested.

'He was a handsome gentleman-like lad—very intellectual looking; but I was grieved to see that he looked delicate, like his father; and his dame told me that he generally had a winter cough.'

'Who took care of him in those days?'

'His maternal aunt—a baronet's wife, with a handsome house in Eaton Square. All his mother's people were well placed in life.'

'Poor boy! hard to have neither father nor mother. It was twelve years ago when you spent that season in London with the Squire,' said Christabel, calculating profoundly with the aid of her finger tips; and Angus Hamleigh was then sixteen, which makes him now eight-and-twenty—dreadfully old. And since then he has been at Oxford—and he got the Newdigate—what is the Newdigate?—and he did not hunt, or drive tandem, or have rats in his rooms, or paint the doors vermillion—like—like the general run of young men,' said Christabel, reddening, and hurrying on confusedly; 'and he was altogether rather a superior sort of person at the university.'

He had not your cousin Leonard's high spirits and powerful physique,' said Mrs. Tregonell, as if she were ever so slightly offended. 'Young men's tastes are so different.'

'Yes,' sighed Christabel, 'it's lucky they are, is it not? It wouldn't do for them *all* to keep rats in their rooms, would it? The poor old colleges would smell so dreadful. Well,' with another sigh, 'it is just three weeks since Angus Hamleigh accepted your invitation to come here to stay, and I have been expiring of curiosity ever since. If he keeps me expiring much longer I shall be dead before he comes. And I have a dreadful foreboding that, when he does appear, I shall detest him.'

'No fear of that,' said Miss Bridgeman, the owner of the voice that issued now and again from the covert of a deep arm-chair on the other side of the fireplace.

'Why not, Mistress Oracle?' asked Christabel.

'Because, as Mr. Hamleigh is accomplished and good-looking, and as you see very few young men of any kind, and none that are particularly attractive, the odds are fifty to one that you will fall in love with him.'

'I am not that kind of person,' protested Christabel, drawing up her long full throat, a perfect throat, and one of the girl's chief beauties.

'I hope not,' said Mrs. Tregonell; 'I trust that Belle has better sense than to fall in love with a young man, just because he happens to come to stay in the house.'

Christabel was on the point of exclaiming, 'Why, Auntie, you did it;' but caught herself up sharply, and cried out instead, with an air of settling the question for ever,

'My dear Jessie, he is eight-and-twenty. Just ten years older than I am.'

'Of course—he's ever so much too old for her. A *blasé* man of the world,' said Mrs. Tregonell. 'I should be deeply sorry to see my darling marry a man of that age—and with such antecedents. I should like her to marry a young man not above two or three years her senior.'

'And fond of rats,' said Jessie Bridgeman to herself, for she had a shrewd idea that she knew the young man whose image filled Mrs. Tregonell's mind as she spoke.

All these words were spoken in a goodly oak panelled room in the Manor House known as Mount Royal, on the slope of a bosky hill about a mile and a half from the little town of Boscastle, on the north coast of Cornwall. It was an easy matter, according to the Herald's Office, to show that Mount Royal had belonged to the Tregonells in the days of the Norman kings; for the Tregonells traced their descent, by a female branch, from the ancient baronial family of Botterell or Bottereaux, who once held a kind of Court in their castle on Mount Royal, had their dungeons and their prisoners, and, in the words of Carew, 'exercised some large jurisdiction.' Of the ancient castle hardly a stone remained; but the house in which Mrs. Tregonell lived was as old as the reign of James the First, and had all the rich and quaint beauty of that delightful period in architecture. Nor was there any prettier room at Mount Royal than this spacious oak-panelled parlour, with curious nooks and cupboards, a recessed fireplace, or 'cosy-corner,' with a small window on each side of the chimney-breast, and one particular alcove placed at an angle of the house, overlooking one of the most glorious views in England. It might be hyperbole perhaps to call those Cornish hills mountains, yet assuredly it was a mountain landscape over which the eye roved as it looked from the windows of Mount Royal; for those wide sweeps of hill side, those deep clefts and gorges, and heathery slopes, on which the dark red cattle grazed in silent peacefulness, and the rocky bed of the narrow river that went rushing through the deep valley, had all the grandeur of the Scottish Highlands, all the pastoral beauty of Switzerland. And away to the right, beyond the wild and indented coast-line, that horned coast which is said to have given its name to Cornwall—Cornu-Wales—stretched the Atlantic.

The room had that quaint charm peculiar to rooms occupied by many generations, and upon which each age as it went by has left its mark. It was a room full of anachronisms. There was some of the good old Jacobean furniture left in it, while spindle-legged Chippendale tables and luxurious nineteenth-century chairs and sofas agreeably contrasted with those heavy oak cabinets and corner cupboards. Here an old Indian screen or a china monster suggested a fashionable auction room, filled with ladies who wore patches and played ombre, and squabbled for ideal ugliness in Oriental pottery; there a delicately carved cherry-wood *prie-dieu*, with claw feet, recalled the earlier beauties of the Stuart Court. Time had faded the stamped velvet curtains to that neutral withered-leaf hue which painters love in a background, and against which bright yellow chrysanthemums and white asters in dark red and blue Japanese bowls, seen dimly in the fitful fire-glow, made patches of light and colour.

The girl kneeling by the matron's chair, looked dreamily into the fire, was even fairer than her surroundings. She was thoroughly English in her beauty, features not altogether perfect, but complexion of that dazzling fairness and wild-rose bloom which is in itself enough for loveliness; a complexion so delicate as to betray every feeling of the sensitive mind, and to vary with every shade of emotion. Her eyes were blue, clear as summer skies, and with an expression of childlike innocence—that look which tells of a soul whose purity has never been tarnished by the knowledge of evil. That frank clear outlook was natural in a girl brought up as Christabel Courtenay had been at a good woman's knee, shut in and sheltered from the rough world, reared in the love and fear of God, shaping every thought of her life by the teaching of the Gospel.

She had been an orphan at nine years old, and had parted for ever from mother and father before her fifth birthday, Mrs. Courtenay leaving her only child in her sister's care, and going out to India to join her husband, one of the Sudder Judges. Husband and wife died of cholera in the fourth year of Mrs. Courtenay's residence at Calcutta, leaving Christabel in her aunt's care.

Mr. Courtenay was a man of ample means, and his wife, daughter and co-heiress with Mrs. Tregonell of Ralph Champernowne, had a handsome dowry, so Christabel might fairly rank as an heiress. On her grandfather's death she inherited half of the Champernowne estate, which was not entailed. But she had hardly ever given a thought to her financial position. She knew that she was a ward in Chancery, and that Mrs. Tregonell was her guardian and adopted mother, that she had always as much money as she wanted, and never experienced the pain of seeing poverty which she could not relieve in some measure from her well-supplied purse. The general opinion in the neighbourhood of Mount Royal was that the Indian Judge had accumulated an immense fortune during his twenty years' labour as a civil servant; but this notion was founded rather upon vague ideas about Warren Hastings and the Padoga tree, and the supposed inability of any Indian official to refuse a bribe, than on plain facts or personal knowledge.

Mrs. Tregonell had been left a widow at thirty-five years of age, a widow with one son, whom she idolized, but who was not a source of peace and happiness. He was open-handed, had no petty vices, and was supposed to possess a noble heart—a fact which Christabel was sometimes inclined to doubt when she saw his delight in the slaughter of birds and beasts, not having in her own nature that sportsman's instinct which can excuse such murder. He was not the kind of lad who would wilfully set his foot upon a worm, but he had no thrill of tenderness or remorseful pity as he looked at the glazing eye, or felt against his hand the last feeble heart-beats of snipe or woodcock. He was a troublesome boy—fond of inferior company, and loving rather to be first fiddle in the saddle-room than to mind his manners in his mother's pink-and-white panelled saloon—among the best people in the neighbourhood. He was lavish to recklessness in the use of money, and therefore was always furnished with followers and flatterers. His University career had been altogether a failure and a disgrace. He had taken no degree—had made himself notorious for those rough pranks which have not even the merit of being original—the traditionary college misdemeanours handed down from generation to generation of undergraduates, and which by their blatant folly incline the outside world to vote for the suppression of Universities and the extinction of the undergraduate race.

His mother had known and suffered all this, yet still loved her boy with a fond excusing love—ever ready to pardon—ever eager to believe that these faults and follies were but the crop of wild oats which must needs precede the ripe and rich harvest of manhood. Such wild youths, she told herself, fatuously, generally make the best men. Leonard would mend his ways before he was five-and-twenty, and would become interested in his estate, and develop into a model Squire, like his admirable father.

That he had no love for scholarship mattered little—a country gentleman, with half a dozen manors to look after, could be but little advantaged by a familiar acquaintance with the integral calculus, or a nice appreciation of the Greek tragedians. When Leonard Tregonell and the college Dons were mutually disgusted with each other to a point that made any further residence at Oxford impossible, the young man graciously announced his intention of making a tour round the world, for the benefit of his health, somewhat impaired by University dissipations, and the widening of his experience in the agricultural line.

'Farming has been reduced to a science,' he told his mother; 'I want to see how it works in our colonies. I mean to make a good many reformations in the management of my farms and the conduct of my tenants when I come home.'

At first loth to part with him, very fearful of letting him so far out of her ken, Mrs. Tregonell ultimately allowed herself to be persuaded that sea voyages and knocking about in strange lands would be the making of her son; and there was no sacrifice, no loss of comfort and delight, which she would not have endured for his benefit. She spent many sad hours in prayer, or on her knees before her open Bible; and at last it seemed to her that her friends and neighbours must be right, and that it would be for Leonard's good to go. If he stayed in England, she could not hope to keep him always in Cornwall. He could go to London, and, no doubt, London vices would be worse than Oxford vices. Yes, it was good for him to go; she thought of Esau, and how, after a foolish and ill-governed youth, the son, who had bartered his father's blessing, yet became an estimable member of society. Why should not her boy flourish as Esau had flourished? but never without the parental blessing. That would be his to the end. He could not sin beyond her large capacity for pardon: he could not exhaust an inexhaustible love. So

Leonard, who had suddenly found that wild Cornish coast, and even the long rollers of the Atlantic contemptibly insignificant as compared with the imagined magnitude of Australian downs, and the grandeurs of Botany Bay, hurried on the preparations for his departure, provided himself with everything expensive in gunnery, fishing-tackle, porpoise-hide thigh-boots, and waterproof gear of every kind, and departed rejoicing in the most admirably appointed Australian steamer. The family doctor, who was one of the many friends in favour of this tour, had strongly recommended the rough-and-tumble life of a sailing-vessel; but Leonard preferred the luxury and swiftness of a steamer, and, suggesting to his mother that a sailing-vessel always took out emigrants, from whom it was more than likely he would catch scarlet fever or small-pox, instantly brought Mrs. Tregonell to perceive that a steamer which carried no second-class passengers was the only fitting conveyance for her son.

He was gone—and, while the widow grieved in submissive silence, telling herself that it was God's will that she and her son should be parted, and that whatever was good for him should be well for her, Christabel and the rest of the household inwardly rejoiced at his absence. Nobody openly owned to being happier without him; but the knowledge that he was far away brought a sense of relief to every one; even to the old servants, who had been so fond of him in his childhood, when the kitchen and servants' hall had ever been a happy hunting-ground for him in periods of banishment from the drawing-room.

'It is no good for me to punish him,' Mrs. Tregonell had remonstrated, with assumed displeasure; 'you all make so much of him.'

'Oh, ma'am, he is such a fine, high-spirited boy,' the cook would reply on these occasions; ''tesn't possible to be angry with him. He has such a spirit.'

'Such a spirit' was only a euphuism for such a temper; and, as years went on, Mr. Tregonell's visits to the kitchen and servants' hall came to be less appreciated by his retainers. He no longer went there to be petted—to run riot in boyish liveliness, upsetting the housemaids' work-boxes, or making toffy under the cook's directions. As he became aware of his own importance, he speedily developed into a juvenile tyrant; he became haughty and overbearing, hectored and swore, befouled the snowy floors and flags with his muddy shooting-boots, made havoc and work wherever he went. The household treated him with unfailing respect, as their late master's son, and their own master, possibly, in the future; but their service was no longer the service of love. His loud strong voice, shouting in the passages and lobbies, scared the maids at their tea. Grooms and stable-boys liked him; for with them he was always familiar, and often friendly. He and they had tastes and occupations in common; but to the women servants and the grave middle-aged butler his presence was a source of discomfort.

Next to her son in Mrs. Tregonell's affection stood her niece Christabel. That her love for the girl who had never given her a moment's pain should be a lesser love than that which she bore to the boy who had seldom given her an hour's unalloyed pleasure was one of the anomalies common in the lives of good women. To love blindly and unreasonably is as natural to a woman as it is to love: and happy she whose passionate soul finds its idol in husband or child, instead of being lured astray by strange lights outside the safe harbour of home. Mrs. Tregonell loved her niece very dearly; but it was with that calm, comfortable affection which mothers are apt to feel for the child who has never given them any trouble. Christabel had been her pupil: all that the girl knew had been learned from Mrs. Tregonell; and, though her education fell far short of the requirements of Girton or Harley Street, there were few girls whose intellectual powers had been more fully awakened, without the taint of pedantry. Christabel loved books, but they were the books her aunt had chosen for her—old-fashioned books for the most part. She loved music, but was no brilliant pianist, for when Mrs. Tregonell, who had taught her carefully up to a certain point, suggested a course of lessons from a German professor at Plymouth, the girl recoiled from the idea of being taught by a stranger.

'If you are satisfied with my playing, Auntie, I am content never to play any better,' she said; so the idea of six months' tuition and study at Plymouth, involving residence in that lively port, was abandoned. London was a far-away world, of which neither aunt nor niece ever thought. That wild northern coast is still two days' journey from the metropolis. Only by herculean labour, in the way of posting across the moor in the grey dawn of morning, can the thing be done in one day; and then scarcely between sunrise and sunset. So Mrs. Tregonell, who loved a life of placid repose, had never been to London since her widowhood, and Christabel had never been there at all. There was an old house in Mayfair, which had belonged to the Tregonells for the last hundred years, and which had cost them a fortune in repairs, but it was either shut up and in the occupation of a caretaker, or let furnished for the season; and no Tregonell had crossed its threshold since the Squire's death. Mrs. Tregonell talked of spending a season in London before Christabel was much older, in order that her niece might be duly presented at Court, and qualified for that place in society which a young lady of good family and ample means might fairly be entitled to hold.

Christabel had no eager desire for the gaieties of a London season. She had spent six weeks in Bath, and had enjoyed an occasional fortnight at Plymouth. She had been taken to theatres and concerts, had seen some of the best actors and actresses, heard a good deal of the finest music, and had been duly delighted with all she saw and heard. But she so fondly loved Mount Royal and its surroundings, she was so completely happy in her home life, that she had no desire to change that tranquil existence. She had a vague idea that London balls and parties must be something very dazzling and brilliant, but she was content to abide her aunt's pleasure and convenience for the time in which she was to know more about metropolitan revelries than was to be gathered from laudatory paragraphs in fashionable newspapers. Youth, with its warm blood and active spirit, is rarely so contented as Christabel was: but then youth is not often placed amid such harmonious circumstances, so protected from the approach of evil.

Christabel Courtenay may have thought and talked more about Mr. Hamleigh during the two or three days that preceded his arrival than was absolutely necessary, or strictly in accordance with that common-sense which characterized most of her acts and thoughts. She was interested in him upon two grounds—first, because he was the only son of the man her aunt had loved and mourned; secondly, because he was the first stranger who had ever come as a guest to Mount Royal.

Her aunt's visitors were mostly people whose faces she had known ever since she could remember: there were such wide potentialities in the idea of a perfect stranger, who was to be domiciled at the Mount for an indefinite period.

'Suppose we don't like him?' she said, speculatively, to Jessie Bridgeman, Mrs. Tregonell's housekeeper, companion, and factotum, who had lived at Mount Royal for the last six years, coming there a girl of twenty, to make herself generally useful in small girlish ways, and proving herself such a clever manager, so bright, competent, and far-seeing, that she had been gradually entrusted with every household care, from the largest to the most minute. Miss Bridgeman was neither brilliant nor accomplished, but she had a genius for homely things, and she was admirable as a companion.

The two girls were out on the hills in the early autumn morning—hills that were golden where the sun touched them, purple in the shadow. The heather was fading, the patches of furze-blossom were daily growing rarer. Yet the hill-sides were alive with light and colour, only less lovely than the translucent blues and greens of yonder wide-stretching sea.

'Suppose we should all dislike him?' repeated Christabel, digging the point of her walking-stick into a ferny hillock on the topmost edge of a deep cleft in the hills, on which commanding spot she had just taken her stand, after bounding up the narrow path from the little wooden bridge at the bottom of the glen, almost as quickly and as lightly as if she had been one of the deeply ruddled sheep that spent their lives on those precipitious slopes; 'wouldn't it be too dreadful, Jessie?'

'It would be inconvenient,' answered Miss Bridgeman, coolly, resting both hands on the horny crook of her sturdy umbrella, and gazing placidly seaward; 'but we could cut him.

'Not without offending Auntie. She is sure to like him, for the sake of Auld Lang Syne. Every look and tone of his will recall his father. But *we* may detest him. And if he should like Mount Royal very much, and go on staying there for ever! Auntie asked him for an indefinite period. She showed me her letter. I thought it was rather too widely hospitable, but I did not like to say so.'

'I always say what I think,' said Jessie Bridgeman, doggedly.

'Of course you do, and go very near being disagreeable in consequence.'

Miss Bridgeman's assertion was perfectly correct. A sturdy truthfulness was one of her best qualifications. She did not volunteer unfavourable criticism; but if you asked her opinion upon any subject you got it, without sophistication. It was her rare merit to have lived with Mrs. Tregonell and Christabel Courtenay six years, dependent upon their liking or caprice for all the comforts of her life, without having degenerated into a flatterer.

'I haven't the slightest doubt as to your liking him,' said Miss Bridgeman, decisively. 'He has spent his life for the most part in cities—and in good society. That I gather from your aunt's account of him. He is sure to be much more interesting and agreeable than the young men who live near here, whose ideas are, for the most part, strictly local. But I very much doubt his liking Mount Royal, for more than one week.'

'Jessie,' cried Christabel, indignantly, 'how can he help liking *this?*' She waved her stick across the autumn landscape, describing a circle which included the gold and bronze hills, the shadowy gorges, the bold headlands curving away to Hartland on one side, to Tintagel on the other—Lundy Island a dim line of dun colour on the horizon.

'No doubt he will think it beautiful—in the abstract. He will rave about it, compare it with the Scottish Highlands—with Wales—with Kerry, declare three Cornish hills the crowning glory of Britain. But in three days he will begin to detest a place where there is only one post out and in, and where he has to wait till next day for his morning paper'

'What can he want with newspapers, if he is enjoying his life with us? I am sure there are books enough at Mount Royal. He need not expire for want of something to read.'

'Do you suppose that books—the best and noblest that ever were written—can make up to a man for the loss of his daily paper? If you do, offer a man Shakespeare when he is looking for the *Daily Telegraph*, or Chaucer when he wants his *Times*, and see what he will say to you. Men don't want to read nowadays, but to know—to be posted in the very latest movements of their fellow-men all over the universe. Reuter's column is all anybody really cares for in the paper. The leaders and the criticism are only so much padding to fill the sheet. People would be better pleased if there were nothing but telegrams.'

'A man who only reads newspapers must be a most vapid companion,' said Christabel.

'Hardly, for he must be brim full of facts.'

'I abhor facts. Well, if Mr. Hamleigh is that kind of person, I hope he may be tired of the Mount in less than a week.'

She was silent and thoughtful as they went home by the monastic churchyard in the hollow, the winding lane and steep village street. Jessie had a message to carry to one of Mrs. Tregonell's pensioners, who lived in a cottage in the lane; but Christabel, who was generally pleased to show her fair young face in such abodes, waited outside on this occasion, and stood in a profound reverie, digging the point of her stick into the loose earth of the mossy bank in front of her, and seriously damaging the landscape.

'I hate a man who does not care for books, who does not love our dear English poets,' she said to herself. 'But I must not say that before Auntie. It would be almost like saying that I hated my cousin Leonard. I hope Mr Hamleigh will be—just a little different from Leonard. Of course he will, if his life has been spent in cities; but then he may be languid and supercilious, looking upon Jessie and me as inferior creatures; and that would be worse than Leonard's roughness. For we all know what a good heart Leonard has, and how warmly attached he is to us.'

Somehow the idea of Leonard's excellent heart and affectionate disposition was not altogether a pleasant one. Christabel shuddered ever so faintly as she stood in the lane thinking of her cousin, who had last been heard of in the Fijis. She banished his image with an effort, and returned to her consideration of that unknown quantity, Angus Hamleigh.

'I am an idiot to be making fancy pictures of him, when at seven o'clock this evening I shall know all about him for good or evil,' she said aloud, as Jessie came out of the cottage, which nestled low down in its little garden, with a slate for a doorstep.

and a slate standing on end at each side of the door, for boundary line, or ornament.

'All that is to be known of the outside of him,' said Jessie, answering the girl's outspoken thought. 'If he is really worth knowing, his mind will need a longer study.'

'I think I shall know at the first glance if he is likeable,' replied Christabel; and then, with a tremendous effort, she contrived to talk about other things as they went down the High Street of Boscastle, which, to people accustomed to a level world, is rather trying. With Christabel the hills were only an excuse for flourishing a Swiss walking-stick. The stick was altogether needless for support to that light well-balanced figure. Jessie, who was very small and slim and sure-footed, always carried her stout little umbrella, winter or summer. It was her *vade-mecum* —good against rain, or sun, or mad bulls, or troublesome dogs. She would have scorned the affectation of cane or alpenstock; but the sturdy umbrella was very dear to her.

CHAPTER II.

BUT THEN CAME ONE, THE LOVELACE OF HIS DAY.

Although Angus Hamleigh came of a good old west country family, he had never been in Cornwall, and he approached that remote part of the country with a curious feeling that he was turning his back upon England and English civilization, and entering a strange wild land where all things would be different. He would meet with a half-barbarous people, perhaps, rough, unkempt, ignorant, brutal, speaking to him in a strange language —such men as inhabited Perthshire and Inverness before civilization travelled northward. He had accepted Mrs. Tregonell's invitation out of kindly feeling for the woman who had loved his father, and who, but for that father's untimely death, might have been to him as a second mother. There was a strong vein of sentiment in his character, which responded to the sentiment betrayed unconsciously in every line of Mrs. Tregonell's letter. His only knowledge of the father he had lost in infancy had come to him from the lips of others, and it pleased him to think that here was one whose memory must be fresher than that of any other friend in whose mind his father's image must needs be as a living thing. He had all his life cherished a regretful fondness for that unknown father, whose shadowy picture he had vainly tried to recall among the first faint recollections of babyhood—the dim dreamland of half-awakened consciousness.

He had frankly and promptly accepted Mrs. Tregonell's invitation; yet he felt that in going to immure himself in an old manor house for a fortnight—anything less than a fortnight would have been uncivil—he was dooming himself to ineffable boredom. Beyond that pious pleasure in parental reminiscences, there could be no possible gratification for a man of the world, who was not an ardent sportsman, in such a place as Mount Royal. Mr. Hamleigh's instincts were of the town, towny. His pleasures were all of an intellectual kind. He had never degraded himself by vulgar profligacy, but he liked a life of excitement and variety; he had always lived at high pressure, and among people posted up to the last moment of the world's history—people who drank the very latest pleasure cup which the Spirt of the Age—a Spirit of passing frivolity—had invented, were it only the newest brand of champagne; and who, in their eagerness to gather the roses of life, outstripped old Time himself, and grew old in advance of their age. He had been contemplating a fortnight in Paris, as the first stage in his journey to Monaco, when Mrs. Tregonell's letter altered his plans. This was not the first time she had asked him to Mount Royal, but on previous occasions his engagements had seemed to him too imperative to be foregone, and he had regretfully declined her invitations. But now the flavour of life had grown somewhat vapid for him, and he was grateful to anyone who would turn his thoughts and fancies into a new direction.

'I shall inevitably be bored there,' he said to himself, when he had littered the railway carriage with newspapers accumulated on the way, 'but I should be bored anywhere else. When a man begins to feel the pressure of the chain upon his leg, it cannot much matter where his walks lead him: the very act of walking is his punishment.'

When a man comes to eight-and-twenty years of age—a man who has had very little to do in this life, except take his pleasure—a great weariness and sense of exhaustion is apt to close round him like a pall. The same man will be ever so much fresher in mind, will have ever so much more zest for life, when he comes to be forty—for then he will have entered upon those calmer enjoyments of middle age which may last him till he is eighty. But at eight-and-twenty there is a death-like calmness of feeling. Youth is gone. He has consumed all the first-fruits of life—spring and summer, with their wealth of flowers, are over; only the quiet autumn remains for him, with her warm browns and dull greys, and cool, moist breath. The fires upon youth's altars have all died out—youth is dead, and the man who was young only yesterday fancies that he might as well be dead also. What is there left for him? Can there be any charm in this life when the looker-on has grey hair and wrinkles?

Having nothing in life to do except seek his own pleasure and spend his ample income, Angus Hamleigh had naturally taken the time of life's march *prestissimo.*

He had never paused in his rose-gathering to wonder whether there might not be a few thorns among the flowers, and whether he might not find them—afterwards. And now the blossoms were all withered, and he was beginning to discover the lasting quality of the thorns. They were such thorns as interfered somewhat with the serenity of his days, and he was glad to turn his face westward, away from everybody he knew, or who knew anything about him.

'My character will present itself to Mrs. Tregonell as a blank page,' he said to himself; 'I wonder what she would think of me if one of my club gossips had enjoyed a quiet evening's talk with her beforehand. A dear friend's analysis of one's character and conduct is always so flattering to both; and I have a pleasant knack of offending my dearest friends!'

Mr. Hamleigh began to look about him a little when the train had left Plymouth. The landscape was wild and romantic, but had none of that stern ruggedness which he expected to behold on the Cornish Border. Deep glens, and wooded dells, with hill-sides steep and broken, but verdant to their topmost crest, and the most wonderful oak coppices that he ever remembered to have seen. Miles upon miles of oak, as it seemed to him, now sinking into the depth of a valley, now mounting to the distant sky line, while from that verdant undulating surface of young wood there stood forth the giants of the grove—wide-spreading oak and towering beech, the mighty growth of many centuries. Between Lidford and Launceston the scenery grew tamer. He had fancied those deep ravines and wooded heights the prelude to a vast and awful symphony, but Mary Tavy and Lifton showed him only a pastoral landscape, with just so much wood and water as would have served for a Creswick or a Constable, and with none of those grand Salvatoresque effects which he had admired in the country round Tavistock. At Launceston he found Mrs. Tregonell's landau waiting for him, with a pair of powerful chestnuts, and a couple of servants, whose neat brown liveries had nothing of that unsophisticated semi-savagery which Mr. Hamleigh had expected in a place so remote.

'Do you drive that way?' he asked, pointing to the almost perpendicular street.

'Yes, sir,' replied the coachman.

'Then I think I'll stroll to the top of the hill while you are putting in my portmanteaux,' he said, and ascended the rustic street at a leisurely pace, looking about him as he went.

The thoroughface which leads from Launceston Station to the ruined castle at the top of the hill is not an imposing promenade. Its architectural features might perhaps be best described like the snakes of Ireland as *nil*—but here and there an old-fashioned lattice with a row of flower-pots, an ancient gable, or a bit of cottage garden hints at the picturesque. Any late additions to the domestic architecture of Launceston favour the unpretending usefulness of Camden Town rather than the aspiring æstheticism of Chelsea or Bedford Park; but to Mr. Hamleigh's eye the rugged old castle keep on the top of the hill made amends. He was not an ardent archæologist, and he did not turn out of his way to see Launceston Church, which might well have rewarded him for his trouble. He was content to have spared those good-looking chestnuts the labour of dragging him up the steep. Here they came springing up the hill He took his place in the carriage, pulled the fur rug over his knees, and ensconced himself comfortably in the roomy back seat.

'This is a sybaritish luxury which I was not prepared for,' he said to himself. 'I'm afraid I shall be rather more bored than I expected. I thought Mrs. Tregonell and her surroundings would at least have the merit of originality. But here is a carriage that must have been built by Peters, and liveries that suggest the sartorial excellence of Conduit Street or Savile Row.'

He watched the landscape with a critical eye, prepared for disappointment and disillusion. First a country road between tall ragged hedges and steep banks, a road where every now and then the branches of the trees hung low over the carriage, and threatened to knock the coachman's hat off. Then they came out upon the wide waste of moorland, a thousand feet above the sea level, and Mr. Hamleigh, acclimatized to the atmosphere of club-houses, buttoned his overcoat, drew the black fur rug closer about him, and shivered a little as the keen breath of the Atlantic, sweeping over far-reaching tracts of hill and heather, blew round him. Far and wide as his gaze could reach, he saw no sign of human habitation. Was the land utterly forsaken? No; a little farther on they passed a hamlet so insignificant, so isolated, that it seemed rather as if half a dozen cottages had dropped from the sky than that so lonely a settlement could be the result of deliberate human inclination. Never in Scotland or Ireland had Mr. Hamleigh seen a more barren landscape or a poorer soil; yet those wild wastes of heath, those distant tors were passing beautiful, and the air he breathed was more inspiring and exhilarating than the atmosphere of any vaunted health-resort which he had ever visited.

'I think I might live to middle age if I were to pitch my tent on this Cornish plateau,' he thought; 'but, then, there are so many things in this life that are worth more than mere length of days.'

He asked the names of the hamlets they passed. This lonely church, dedicated to St. David—whence, oh! whence came the congregation—belonged to the parish of Davidstowe; and here there was a holy well; and here a Vicarage; and there—oh! crowning evidence of civilization—a post-office; and there a farm-house; and that was the end of Davidstowe. A little later they came to cross roads, and the coachman touched his hat, and said, 'This is Victoria,' as if he were naming a town or settlement of some kind. Mr. Hamleigh looked about him, and beheld a low-roofed cottage, which he assumed to be some kind of public-house, possibly capable of supplying beer and tobacco; but other vestige of human habitation there was none. He leant back in the carriage, looking across the hills, and saying to himself, 'Why, Victoria?' Was that unpretentious and somewhat dilapidated hostelry the Victoria Hotel? or the Victoria Arms? or was Royalty's honoured name given, in an arbitrary manner, to the cross roads and the granite finger-post? He never knew. The coachman said shortly, 'Victoria,' and as 'Victoria' he ever after heard that spot described. And now the journey was all downhill. They drove downward and downward, until Mr. Hamleigh began to feel as if they were travelling towards the centre of the earth—as if they had got altogether below the outer crust of this globe, and must be gradually nearing the unknown gulfs beneath. Yet, by some geographical mystery, when they turned out of the high road and went in at a lodge gate, and drove gently upward along an avenue of elms, in whose rugged tops the rooks were screaming, Mr. Hamleigh found that he was still high above the undulating edges of the cliffs that overtopped the Atlantic, while the great waste of waters lay far below. golden with the last rays of the setting sun.

They drove, by a gentle ascent, to the stone porch of Mount Royal, and here Mrs. Tregonell stood, facing the sunset, with an Indian shawl wrapped round her, waiting for her guest.

'I heard the carriage, Mr. Hamleigh,' she said, as Angus alighted: 'I hope you do not think me too impatient to see what change twelve years have made in you?'

'I'm afraid they have not been particularly advantageous to me,' he answered, lightly, as they shook hands. 'How good of you to receive me on the threshold! and what a delightful place you have here! Before I got to Launceston, I began to be afraid that Cornwall was commonplace—and now I'm enchanted with it. Your moors and hills are like fairy-land to me!'

'It is a world of our own, and we are very fond of it,' said the widow; 'I shall be sorry if ever a railway makes Boscastle open to everybody.'

'And what a noble old house!' exclaimed Angus, as he followed his hostess across the oak-panelled hall, with its wide shallow staircase, curiously carved balustrades, and lantern roof. Are you quite alone here?'

'Oh, no; I have my niece, and a young lady who is a companion to both of us.'

Angus Hamleigh shuddered.

Three women! He was to exist for a fortnight in a house with three solitary females. A niece and a companion! The niece rustic and gawky; the companion sour and frumpish. He began, hurriedly, to cast about in his mind for a convenient friend, to whom he could telegraph to send him a telegram, summoning him back to London on urgent business. He was still meditating this, when the butler opened the door of a spacious room, lined from floor to ceiling with books, and he followed Mrs. Tregonell in, and found himself in the bosom of the family. The simple picture of home-comfort, of restfulness and domestic peace, which met his curious gaze as he entered, pleased him better than anything he had seen of late. Club life—with its too studious indulgence of man's native selfishness and love of ease—fashionable life, with its insatiable craving for that latter-day form of display which calls itself Culture, Art, or Beauty— had afforded him no vision so enchanting as the wide hearth and high chimney of this sober, book-lined room, with the fair and girlish form kneeling in front of the old dogstove, framed in the glaring light of the fire.

The tea-table had been wheeled near the hearth, and Mrs. Bridgeman sat before the bright red tea-tray, and old brass kettle, ready to administer to the wants of the traveller, who would be hardly human if he did not thirst for a cup of tea after driving across the moor. Christabel knelt in front of the fire, worshipping, and being worshipped by, a sleek black-and-white sheep-dog, native to the soil, and of a rare intelligence—a creature by no means approaching the Scotch colley in physical beauty, but of a fond and faithful nature, born to be the friend of man. As Christabel rose and turned to greet the stranger, Mr. Hamleigh was agreeably reminded of an old picture—a Lely or a Kneller, perhaps. This was not in any wise the rustic image which had flashed across his mind at the mention of Mrs. Tregonell's niece. He had expected to see a bouncing, countryfied maiden—rosy, buxom, the picture of commonplace health and vigour. The girl he saw was nearer akin to the lily than the rose—tall, slender, dazzlingly fair—not fragile or sickly in anywise—for the erect figure was finely moulded, the swan-like throat was round and full. He was prepared for the florid beauty of a milkmaid, and he found himself face to face with the elegance of an ideal duchess, the picturesque loveliness of an old Venetian portrait.

Christabel's dark brown velvet gown and square point lace collar, the bright hair falling in shadowy curls over her forehead, and rolled into a loose knot at the back of her head, sinned in no wise against Mr. Hamleigh's notions of good taste. Then was a picturesqueness about the style which indicated that Miss Courtenay belonged to that advanced section of womankind which takes its ideas less from modern fashion-plates than from old pictures. So long as her archaism went no further back than Vandyke or Moroni he would admire and approve; but he shuddered at the thought that to-morrow she might burst upon him in a mediæval morning-gown, with high-shouldered sleeves, a ruff, and a satchel. The picturesque idea was good, within limits; but one never knew how far it might go.

There was nothing picturesque about the lady sitting before the tea-tray, who looked up brightly, and gave him a gracious bend of her small neat head, in acknowledgment of Mrs. Tregonell's introduction—'Mr. Hamleigh, Miss Bridgeman!' This was the companion—and the companion was plain: not unpleasantly plain, not in any matter repulsive, but a lady about whose looks there could be hardly any compromise. Her complexion was of a sallow darkness, unrelieved by any glow of colour; her eyes were grey, acute, honest, friendly, but not beautiful; her nose was sharp and pointed—not at all a bad nose; but there was a hardness about nose and mouth and chin, as of features cut out of bone with a very sharp knife. Her teeth were good, and in a lovelier mouth might have been the object of much admiration. Her hair was of that nondescript monotonous brown which has been unkindly called bottle-green, but it was arranged with admirable neatness, and offended less than many a tangled pate, upon whose locks of spurious gold the owner has wasted much time and money. There was nothing unpardonable in Miss Bridgeman's plainness, as Angus Hamleigh said of her later. Her small figure was neatly made, and her dark-grey gown fitted to perfection.

'I hope you like the little bit of Cornwall that you have seen this afternoon, Mr. Hamleigh,' said Christabel, seating herself in a low chair in the shadow of the tall chimney-piece, fenced in by her aunt's larger chair.

'I am enraptured with it! I came here with the desire to be intensely Cornish. I am prepared to believe in witches—warlocks——'

'We have no warlocks,' said Christabel. 'They belong to the North.'

'Well, then, wise women—wicked young men who play football on Sunday, and get themselves turned into granite—rocking stones—magic wells—Druids—and King Arthur. I believe the principal point is to be open to conviction about Arthur. Now, I am prepared to swallow everything—his castle—the river where his crown was found after the fight—was it his crown, by-the-by, or somebody else's? which *he* found—his hair-brushes—his boots—anything you please to show me.'

'We will show you his quoit to-morrow, on the road to Tintagel,' said Miss Bridgeman. 'I don't think you would like to swallow that actually. He hurled it from Tintagel to Trevalga in one of his sportive moods. We shall be able to give you plenty of amusement if you are a good walker, and are fond of hills.'

'I adore them in the abstract, contemplated from one's windows, or in a picture; but there is an incompatibility between the human anatomy and a road set on end, like a ladder, which I have never yet overcome. Apart from the outside question of my legs—which are obvious failures when tested by an angle of forty-five degrees—I'm afraid my internal machinery is not quite so tough as it ought to be for a thorough enjoyment of mountaineering.'

Mrs. Tregonell sighed, ever so faintly, in the twilight. She was thinking of her first lover, and how that fragility, which meant early death, had showed itself in his inability to enjoy the moorland walks which were the delight of her girlhood.

'The natural result of bad habits,' said Miss Bridgeman, briskly. 'How can you expect to be strong or active, when I dare say you have spent the better part of your life in hansom cabs and express trains! I don't mean to be impertinent, but I know that is the general way with gentlemen out of the shooting and hunting season.'

'And as I am no sportsman, I am a somewhat exaggerated example of the vice of laziness fostered by congenial circumstances, acting on a lymphatic temperament. If you write books, as I believe most ladies do now-a-days, you shall put me in one of them, as an awful warning.'

'I don't write books, and, if I did, I would not flatter your vanity by making you my model sinner,' retorted Jessie; 'but I'll do something better for you, if Christabel will help me. I'll reform you.'

'A million thanks for the mere thought! I hope the process will be pleasant.'

'I hope so, too. We shall begin by walking you off your legs.'

'They are so indifferent as a means of locomotion that I could very well afford to lose them, if you could hold out any hope of my getting a better pair.'

'A week hence, if you submit to my treatment, you will be as active as the chamoise hunter in "Manfred."'

'Enchanting—always provided that you and Miss Courtenay will follow the chase with me.'

'Depend upon it, we shall not trust you to take your walks alone, unless you have a pedometer which will bear witness to the distance you have done, and which you will be content to submit to our inspection on your return,' replied Jessie, sternly.

'I am afraid you are a terribly severe high priestess of this new form of culture,' said Mr. Hamleigh, looking up from his teacup with a lazy smile, 'almost as bad as the Dweller on the Threshold, in Bulwer's "Zanoni."'

'There is a dweller on the threshold of every science and every admirable mode of life, and his name is Idleness," answered Miss Bridgeman.

'The *vis inertiæ*, the force of letting things alone,' said Angus; 'yes, that is a tremendous power, nobly exemplified by vestries and boards of works—to say nothing of Cabinets, Bishops, and the High Court of Chancery! I delight in that verse of Scripture, "Their strength is to sit still."'

'There shall be very little sitting still for you if you submit yourself to Christabel and me,' replied Miss Bridgeman.

'I have never tried the water-cure—the descriptions I have heard from adepts have been too repellent; but I have an idea that this system of yours must be rather worse than hydropathy, said Angus, musingly—evidently very much entertained at the way in which Miss Bridgeman had taken him in hand.

'I was not going to let him pose after Lamartine's *poëte mourant*, just because his father died of lung disease,' said Jessie, ten minutes afterwards, when the warning gong had sounded, and Mr. Hamleigh had gone to his room to dress for dinner, and the two young women were whispering together before the fire, while Mrs. Tregonell indulged in a placid doze.

'Do you think he is consumptive, like his father?' asked Christabel, with a compassionate look; 'he has a very delicate appearance.'

'Hollow-cheeked, and prematurely old, like a man who has lived on tobacco and brandy-and-soda, and has spent his nights in club-house card-rooms.'

'We have no right to suppose that,' said Christabel, 'since we know really nothing about him.'

'Major Bree told me he has lived a racketty life, and that if he were not to pull up very soon he would be ruined both in health and fortune.'

'What can the Major know about him?' exclaimed Christabel, contemptuously.

This Major Bree was a great friend of Christabel's; but there are times when one's nearest and dearest are too provoking for endurances.

'Major Bree has been buried alive in Cornwall for the last twenty years. He is at least a quarter of a century behind the age,' she said, impatiently.

'He spent a fortnight in London the year before last,' said Jessie; 'it was then that he heard such a bad account of Mr. Hamleigh.'

'Did he go about to clubs and places making inquiries, like a private detective?' said Christabel, still contemptuous; 'I hate such fetching and carrying!'

'Here he comes to answer for himself,' replied Jessie, as the door opened, and a servant announced Major Bree.

Mrs. Tregonell started from her slumbers at the opening of the door, and rose to greet her guest. He was a very frequent visitor, so frequent that he might be said to live at Mount Royal, although his nominal abode was a cottage on the outskirts of Boscastle—a stone cottage on the crest of a steep hill-side, with a delightful little garden, perched, as it were, on the edge of a verdant abyss. He was tall, stout, elderly, grey, and florid—altogether a comfortable-looking man, clean shaved, save for a thin grey moustache with the genuine cavalry droop, iron grey eyebrows, which looked like a repetition of the moustache on a somewhat smaller scale, keen grey eyes, a pleasant smile, and a well set-up figure. He dressed well, with a sobriety becoming his years, and was always the pink of neatness. A man welcome everywhere, on account of an inborn pleasantness, which prompted him always to say and do the right thing; but most of all welcome at Mount Royal, as a first cousin of the late Squire's, and Mrs. Tregonell's guide, philosopher, and friend in all matters relating to the outside world, of which, despite his twenty years' hybernation at Boscastle, the widow supposed him to be an acute observer and an infallible judge. Was he not one of the few inhabitants of that western village who took in the *Times* newspaper?

'Well!' exclaimed Major Bree, addressing himself generally to the three ladies, 'he has come—what do you think of him?'

'He is painfully like his poor father,' said Mrs. Tregonell.

'He has a most interesting face and winning manner, and I'm afraid we shall all get ridiculously fond of him,' said Miss Bridgeman, decisively.

Christabel said nothing. She knelt on the hearth-rug, playing with Randie, the black-and-white sheep-dog.

'And what have you to say about him, Christabel?' asked the Major.

'Nothing. I have not had time to form an opinion,' replied the girl; and then lifting her clear blue eyes to the Major's friendly face, she said, gravely, "but I think, Uncle Oliver, it was very unkind and unfair of you to prejudice Jessie against him before he came here.'

'Unkind!—unfair! Here's a shower of abuse! I prejudice! Oh! I remember. Mrs. Tregonell asked me what people thought of him in London, and I was obliged to acknowledge that his reputation was—well—no better than that of the majority of young men who have more money than common sense. But that was two years ago—*Nous avons changé tout cela!*'

'If he was wicked then, he must be wicked now,' said Christabel.

'Wicked is a monstrously strong word!' said the Major. 'Besides, that does not follow. A man may have a few wild oats to sow, and yet become a very estimable person afterwards. Miss Bridgeman is tremendously sharp—she'll be able to find out all about Mr. Hamleigh from personal observation before he has been here a week. I defy him to hide his weak points from her.'

'What is the use of being plain and insignificant if one has not some advantage over one's superior fellow-creatures?' asked Jessie.

'Miss Bridgeman has too much expression to be plain, and she is far too clever to be insignificant,' said Major Bree, with a stately bow. He always put on a stately manner when he addressed himself to Jessie Bridgeman, and treated her in all things with as much respect as if she had been a queen. He explained to Christabel that this was the homage which he paid to the royalty of intellect; but Christabel had a shrewd suspicion that the Major cherished a secret passion for Miss Bridgeman, as exalted and as hopeless as the love that Chastelard bore for Mary Stuart. He had only a small pittance besides his half-pay, and he had a very poor opinion of his own merits; so it was but natural that, at fifty-five, he should hesitate to offer himself to a young lady of six-and-twenty, of whose sharp tongue he had a wholesome awe.

Mr. Hamleigh came back before much more could be said about him, and a few minutes afterwards they all went in to dinner, and in the brighter lamplight of the dining-room Major Bree and the three ladies had a better opportunity of forming their opinion as to the external graces of their guest.

He was good-looking—that fact even malice could hardly dispute. Not so handsome as the absent Leonard, Mrs. Tregonell told herself complacently; but she was constrained at the same time to acknowledge that her son's broadly moulded features and florid complexion lacked the charm and interest which a woman's eye found in the delicate chiselling and subdued tones of Angus Hamleigh's countenance. His eyes were darkest grey, his complexion was fair and somewhat pallid, his hair brown, with a natural curl which neither fashion nor the barber could altogether suppress. His cheeks were more sunken than they should have been at eight-and-twenty, and the large dark eyes were unnaturally bright. All this the three ladies and

Major Bree had ample time for observing, during the leisurely course of dinner. There was no flagging in the conversation, from the beginning to the end of the repast. Mr. Hamleigh was ready to talk about anything and everything, and his interest in the most trifling local subjects, whether real or assumed, made him a delightful companion. In the drawing-room, after dinner, he proved even more admirable; for he discovered a taste for, and knowledge of, the best music, which delighted Jessie and Christabel, who were both enthusiasts. He had read every book they cared for—and a wide world of books besides—and was able to add to their stock of information upon all their favourite subjects, without the faintest touch of arrogance.

'I don't think you can help liking him, Jessie,' said Christabel, as the two girls went upstairs to bed. The younger lingered a little in Miss Bridgeman's room for the discussion of their latest ideas. There was a cheerful fire burning in the large basket grate, for autumn nights were chill upon that wild coast. Christabel assumed her favourite attitude in front of the fire, with her faithful Randie winking and blinking at her and the fire alternately. He was a privileged dog—allowed to sleep on a sheepskin mat in the gallery outside his mistress's door, and to go into her room every morning, in company with the maid who carried her early cup of tea, when, after the exchange of a few remarks, in baby language on her part, and expressed on his by a series of curious grins and much wagging of his insignificant apology for a tail, he would dash out of the room, and out of the house, for his morning constitutional among the sheep upon some distant hill—coming home with an invigorated appetite, in time for the family breakfast at nine o'clock.

'I don't think you can help liking him—as—as a casual acquaintance!' repeated Christabel, finding that Jessie stood in a dreamy silence, twisting her one diamond ring—a birthday gift from Miss Courtenay—round and round upon her slender finger.

'I don't suppose any of us can help liking him,' Jessie answered at last, with her eyes on the fire. 'All I hope is, that some of us will not like him too much. He has brought a new element into our lives — a new interest—which may end by being a painful one. I feel distrustful of him.'

'Why distrustful? Why, Jessie, you who are generally the very essence of flippancy—who make light of almost everything in life—except religion—thank God, you have not come to that yet!—you to be so serious about such a trifling matter as a visit from a man who will most likely be gone back to London in a fortnight—gone out of our lives altogether, perhaps: for I don't suppose he will care to repeat his experiences in a lonely country-house.'

'He may be gone, perhaps—yes—and it is quite possible that he may never return—but shall we be quite the same after he has left us? Will nobody regret him—wish for his return—yearn for it—sigh for it—die for it—feeling life worthless—a burthen, without him?'

'Why, Jessie, you look like a Pythoness.'

'Belle, Belle, my darling, my innocent one, you do not know what it is to care—for a bright particular star—and know how remote it is from your life—never to be brought any nearer! I felt afraid to-night when I saw you and Mr. Hamleigh at the piano—you playing, he leaning over you as you played—both seeming so happy, so united by the sympathy of the moment! If he is not a good man—if——'

'But we have no reason to think ill of him. You remember what Uncle Oliver said—he had only been—a—a little racketty, like other young men,' said Christabel, eagerly; and then, with a sudden embarrassment, reddening and laughing shyly, she added, 'and indeed, Jessie, if it is any idea of danger to me that is troubling your wise head, there is no need for alarm. I am not made of such inflammable stuff—I am not the kind of girl to fall in love with the first comer.'

'With the first comer, no! But when the Prince comes in a fairy tale, it matters little whether he comes first or last. Fate has settled the whole story beforehand.'

'Fate has had nothing to say about me and Mr. Hamleigh. No, Jessie, believe me, there is no danger for *me*—and I don't suppose that you are going to fall in love with him?'

'Because I am so old?' said Miss Bridgeman, still looking at the fire; 'no, it would be rather ridiculous in a person of my age, plain and *passée*, to fall in love with your Alcibiades.'

'No, Jessie, but because you are too wise ever to be carried away by a sentimental fancy. But why do you speak of him so contemptuously? One would think you had taken a dislike to him. We ought at least to remember that he is my aunt's friend, and the son of some one she once dearly loved.'

'Once,' repeated Jessie, softly; 'does not once in that case mean always?'

She was thinking of the Squire's commonplace good looks and portly figure, as represented in the big picture in the dining-room—the picture of a man in a red coat, leaning against the shoulder of a big bay horse, and with a pack of harriers fawning round him—and wondering whether the image of that dead man, whose son was in the house to-night, had not sometimes obtruded itself upon the calm plenitude of Mrs. Tregonell's domestic joys.

'Don't be afraid that I shall forget my duty to your aunt or your aunt's guest, dear,' she said suddenly, as if awakened from a reverie. 'You and I will do all in our power to make him happy, and to shake him out of lazy London ways, and then, when we have patched up his health, and the moorland air has blown a little colour into his hollow cheeks, we will send him back to his clubs and his theatres, and forget all about him. And now, good-night, my Christabel,' she said, looking at her watch; see! it is close upon midnight—dreadful dissipation for Mount Royal, where half-past ten is the usual hour.'

Christabel kissed her and departed, Randie following to the door of her chamber—such a pretty room, with old panelled walls painted pink and grey, old furniture, old china, snowy draperies, and books—a girl's daintily bound books, selected and purchased by herself—in every available corner; a neat cottage piano in a recess, a low easy-chair by the fire, with a five o'clock tea-table in front of it; desks, portfolios, work-baskets—all the frivolities of a girl's life; but everything arranged with a womanly neatness which indicated industrious habits and a well-ordered mind. No scattered sheets of music—no fancy-work pitch-and-tossed about the room—no slovenliness claiming to be excused as artistic disorder.

Christabel said her prayers, and read her accustomed portion of Scripture, but not without some faint wrestlings with Satan, who on this occasion took the shape of Angus Hamleigh. Her mind was overcharged with wonder at this new phenomenon in daily life, a man so entirely different from any of the men she had ever met hitherto—so accomplished, so highly cultured; yet taking his accomplishments and culture as a thing of course, as if all men were so.

She thought of him as she lay awake for the first hour of the still night, watching the fire fade and die, and listening to the long roll of the waves, hardly audible at Mount Royal amidst all the common-place noises of day, but heard in the solemn silence of night. She let her fancies shape a vision of her aunt's vanished youth—that one brief bright dream of happiness, so miserably broken!—and wondered and wondered how it was possible for any one to outlive such a grief. Still more incredible did it seem that any one who had so loved and so lost could ever listen to another lover; and yet the thing had been done, and Mrs. Tregonell's married life had been called happy. She always spoke of the Squire as the best of men—was never weary of praising him—loved to look up at his portrait on the wall—preserved every unpicturesque memorial of his unpicturesque life—heavy gold and silver snuff boxes, clumsy hunting crops, spurs, guns, fishing-rods. The relics of his murderous pursuits would have filled an arsenal. And how fondly she loved her son who resembled that departed father—save in lacking some of his best qualities? How she doated on Leonard, the most commonplace and unattractive of young men! The thought of her cousin set Christabel on a new train of speculation. If Leonard had been at home when Mr. Hamleigh came to Mount Royal, how would they two have suited each other? Like fire and water, like oil and vinegar, like the wolf and the lamb, like any two creatures most antagonistic by nature. It was a happy accident that Leonard was away. She was still thinking when she fell asleep, with that uneasy sense of pain and trouble in the future which was always suggested to her by Leonard's image—a dim unshapen difficulty waiting for her somewhere along the untrodden road of her life—a lion in the path.

CHAPTER III.

'TINTAGEL, HALF IN SEA, AND HALF ON LAND.'

THERE was no sense of fear or trouble of any kind in the mind of anybody the next morning after breakfast, when Christabel, Miss Bridgeman, and Mr. Hamleigh started, in the young lady's own particular pony carriage, for an exploring day, attended by Randie, who was intensely excited, and furnished with a pic-nic basket which made them independent of the inn at Trevena, and afforded the opportunity of taking one's luncheon under difficulties upon a windy height, rather than with the commonplace comforts of an hotel parlour, guarded against wind and weather They were going to do an immense deal upon this first day. Christabel, in her eagerness, wanted to exhibit all her lions at once.

'Of course, you must see Tintagel,' she said; 'everybody who comes to this part of the world is in a tremendous hurry to see King Arthur's castle. I have known people to set out in the middle of the night.'

'And have you ever known any one of them who was not just a little disappointed with that stupendous monument of traditional royalty?' asked Miss Bridgeman, with her most prosaic air. 'They expect so much—halls, and towers, and keep, and chapel—and find only ruined walls, and the faint indication of a grave-yard. King Arthur is a name to conjure with, and Tintagel is like Mont Blanc or the Pryramids. It can never be so grand as the vision its very name has evoked.'

'I blush to say that I have thought very little about Tintagel hitherto,' said Mr. Hamleigh; 'it has not been an integral part of my existence; so my expectations are more reasonable than those of the enthusiastic tourist. I promise to be delighted with your ruins.'

'Oh, but you will pretend,' said Christabel, 'and that will be hateful! I would rather have to deal with one of those provoking people who look about them blankly, and exclaim, "Is this all?" and who stand in the very centre of Arthur's Hall, and ask, "And, pray, where is Tintagel?—when are we to see the castle?" No! give me the man who can take in the grandeur of that wild height at a glance, and whose fancy can build up those ruined walls, re-create those vanished towers, fill the halls with knights in shining armour, and lovely ladies—see Guinevere herself upon her throne—clothed in white samite—mystic, wonderful!'

'And with Lancelot in the background,' said Mr. Hamleigh. 'I think the less we say about Guinevere the better, and your snaky Vivien, and your senile Merlin, your prying Modred. What a disreputable set these Round Table people seem to have been altogether—they need have been dead thirteen hundred years for us to admire them!'

They were driving along the avenue by this time, the stout chestnut cob going gaily in the fresh morning air—Mr. Hamleigh sitting face to face with Christabel as she drove. What a fair face it was in the clear light of day! How pure and delicate every tone, from the whiteness of the lily to the bloom of the wild rose! How innocent the expression of the large liquid eyes, which seemed to smile at him as he talked! He had known so many pretty women—his memory was like a gallery of beautiful faces; but he could recall no face so completely innocent, so divinely young. 'It is the youthfulness of an unsullied mind,' he said to himself; 'I have known plenty of girls as young in years, but not one perfectly pure from the taint of worldliness and vanity. The trail of the serpent was over them all!'

They drove down hill into Boscastle, and then straightway began to ascend still steeper hills upon the other side of the harbour.

'You ought to throw a viaduct across the valley,' said Mr. Hamleigh—'something like Brunel's bridge at Saltash; but perhaps you have hardly traffic enough to make it pay.'

They went winding up the new road to Trevena, avoiding the village street, and leaving the Church of the Silent Tower on its windy height on their right hand. The wide Atlantic lay far below them on the other side of those green fields which bordered the road; the air they breathed was keen with the soft breath of the sea. But autumn had hardly plucked a leaf from the low storm-beaten trees, or a flower from the tall hedgerows, where the red blossom of the Ragged Robin mixed with the pale gold of the hawk-weed, and the fainter yellow of the wild cistus. The ferns had hardly begun to wither, and Angus Hamleigh, whose last experiences had been among the stone walls of Aberdeenshire, wondered at the luxuriance of this western world, where the banks were built-up and fortified with boulders of marble-veined spar.

They drove through the village of Trevalga, in which there is never an inn or public-house of any kind—not even a cottage licensed for the sale of beer. There was the wheelwright, carpenter, builder, Jack-of-all-trades, with his shed and his yard—the blacksmith, with his forge going merrily—village school—steam threshing-machine at work—church—chapel; but never a drop of beer—and yet the people at Trevalga are healthy, and industrious, and decently clad, and altogether comfortable looking.

'Some day we will take you to call at the Rectory,' said Christabel, pointing skywards with her whip.

'Do you mean that the Rector has gone to Heaven?' asked Angus, looking up into the distant blue; 'or is there any earthly habitation higher than the road on which we are driving.

'Didn't you see the end of the lane, just now?' asked Christabel, laughing; 'it is rather steep—an uphill walk all the way; but the views are lovely.'

'We will walk to the Rectory to-morrow,' said Miss Bridgeman; 'this lazy mode of transit must not be tolerated after to-day.'

Even the drive to Trevena was not all idleness; for after they had passed the entrance to the path leading to the beautiful waterfall of St. Nectan's Kieve, hard by St. Piran's chapel and well—the former degraded to a barn, and the latter, once of holy repute, now chiefly useful as a cool repository for butter from the neighbouring dairy of Trethevy Farm—they came to a hill, which had to be walked down; to the lowest depth of the Rocky Valley, where a stone bridge spans the rapid brawling stream that leaps as a waterfall into the gorge at St. Nectan's Kieve, about a mile higher up the valley. And then they came to a corresponding hill, which had to be walked up—because in either case it was bad for the cob to have a weight behind him. Indeed, the cob was so accustomed to consideration in this matter, that he made a point of stopping politely for his people to alight at either end of anything exceptional in the way of a hill.

'I'm afraid you spoil your pony,' said Mr. Hamleigh, throwing the reins over his arm, and resigning himself to a duty, which made him feel very much like a sea-side flyman earning his day's wages toilsomely, and saving his horse with a view to future fares.

'Better that than to spoil you,' answered Miss Bridgeman, as she and Christabel walked briskly beside him. 'But if you fasten the reins to the dashboard, you may trust Felix.'

'Won't he run away?'

'Not he,' answered Christabel. 'He knows that he would never be so happy with anybody else as he is with us.'

'But mightn't he take a fancy for a short run; just far enough to allow of his reducing that dainty little carriage to match-wood? A well-fed under-worked pony so thoroughly enjoys that kind of thing.'

'Felix has no such diabolical suggestions He is a conscientious person, and knows his duty. Besides, he is not underworked. There is hardly a day that he does not carry us somewhere.'

Mr. Hamleigh surrendered the reins, and Felix showed himself worthy of his mistress's confidence, following at her heels like a dog, with his honest brown eyes fixed on the slim tall figure, as if it had been his guiding star.

'I want you to admire the landscape,' said Christabel, when they were on the crest of the last hill; 'is not that a lovely valley?'

Mr. Hamleigh willingly admitted the fact. The beauty of a pastoral landscape, with just enough of rugged wildness for the picturesque, could go no further.

'Creswick has immortalized yonder valley by his famous picture of the mill,' said Miss Bridgeman, 'but the romantic old mill of the picture has lately been replaced by that large ungainly building, quite out of keeping with its surroundings.'

'Have you ever been in Switzerland?' asked Angus of Christabel, when they had stood for some moments in silent contemplation of the landscape.

'Never.'

'Nor in Italy?'

'No. I have never been out of England. Since I was five years old I have hardly spent a year of my life out of Cornwall.'

'Happy Cornwall, which can show so fair a product of its soil! Well, Miss Courtenay, I know Italy and Switzerland by heart, and I like this Cornish landscape better than either. It is not so beautiful—it would not do as well for a painter or a poet; but it comes nearer an Englishman's heart. What can one have better than the hills and the sea? Switzerland can show you bigger hills, ghostly snow-shrouded pinnacles that mock the eye, following each other like a line of phantoms, losing themselves in the infinite; but Switzerland cannot show you that.'

He pointed to the Atlantic: the long undulating line of the coast, rocky, rugged, yet verdant, with many a curve and promontory, many a dip and rise.

'It is the most everlasting kind of beauty, is it not?' asked Christabel, delighted at this little gush of warm feeling in one whose usual manner was so equable. 'One could never tire of the sea. And I am always proud to remember that our sea is so big—stretching away and away to the New World. I should have liked it still better before the days of Columbus, when it led to the unknown!'

'Ah!' sighed Angus, 'youth always yearns for the undiscovered. Middle age knows that there is nothing worth discovering!'

On the top of the hill they paused for a minute or so to contemplate the ancient Borough of Bossiney, which, until disfranchised in 1832, returned two members to Parliament, with a constituency of little more than a dozen, and which once had Sir Francis Drake for its representative. Here Mr. Hamleigh beheld that modest mound called the Castle Hill, on the top of which it was customary to read the writs before the elections.

An hour later they were eating their luncheon on that windy height where once stood the castle of the great king. To Christabel the whole story of Arthur and his knights was as real as if it had been a part of her own life. She had Tennyson's Arthur and Tennyson's Lancelot in her heart of hearts, and knew just enough of Sir Thomas Mallory's prose to give substance to the Laureate's poetic shadows. Angus amused himself a little at her expense, as they ate their chicken and salad on the grassy mounds which were supposed to be the graves of heroes who died before Athelstane drove the Cornish across the Tamar, and made his victorious progress through the country, even to the Scilly Isles, after defeating Howel, the last King of Cornwall.

'Do you really think that gentlemanly creature in the Laureate's epic—that most polished and perfect and most intensely modern English gentleman, self-contained, considerate of others, always the right man in the right place—is one whit like that half-naked sixth century savage—the real Arthur—whose Court costume was a coat of blue paint, and whose war-shriek was the yell of a Red Indian? What can be more futile than our setting up any one Arthur, and bowing the knee before him, in the face of the fact that Great Britain teems with monuments of Arthurs—Arthur's Seat in Scotland, Arthur's Castle in Wales, Arthur's Round Table here, there, and everywhere? Be sure that Arthur—Ardheer—the highest chief—was a generic name for the princes of those days, and that there were more Arthurs than ever there were Cæsars.'

'I don't believe one word you say,' exclaimed Christabel, indignantly; 'there was only one Arthur, the son of Uther and Ygerne, who was born in the castle that stood on this very cliff, on the first night of the year, and carried away in secret by Merlin, and reared in secret by Sir Anton's wife—the brave good Arthur—the Christian king—who was killed at the battle of

Camlan, near Slaughter Bridge, and was buried at Glastonbury.'

'And embalmed by Tennyson. The Laureate invented Arthur—he took out a patent for the Round Table and his invention is only a little less popular than that other product of the age, the sewing-machine. How many among modern tourists would care about Tintagel if Tennyson had not revived the old legend?'

The butler had put up a bottle of champagne for Mr. Hamleigh—the two ladies drinking nothing but sparkling water—and in this beverage he drank hail to the spirit of the legendary prince.

'I am ready to believe anything now you have me up here,' he said, 'for I have a shrewd idea that without your help I should never be able to get down again. I should live and die on the top of this rocky promontory—sweltering in the summer sun—buffeted by the winter winds—an unwilling Simeon Stylites.'

'Do you know that the very finest sheep in Cornwall are said to be grown on that island,' said Miss Bridgeman gravely, pointing to the grassy top of the isolated crag in the foreground, wheron once stood the donjon deep. 'I don't know why it should be so, but it is a tradition.'

'Among butchers?' said Angus. 'I suppose even butchers have their traditions. And the poor sheep who are condemned to exile on that lonely rock—the St. Helena of their woolly race—do they know that they are achieving a posthumous perfection—that they are straining towards the ideal in butcher's meat? There is room for much thought in the question.'

'The tide is out,' said Christabel, look seaward; 'I think we ought to do Trebarwith sands to-day.'

'Is Trebarwith another of your lions?' asked Angus, placidly.

'Yes.'

'Then, please save him for to-morrow. Let me drink the cup of pleasure to the dregs where we are. This champagne has a magical taste, like the philter which Tristan and Iseult were so foolish as to drink while they sailed across from Ireland to this Cornish shore. Don't be alarmed, Miss Bridgeman, I am not going to empty the bottle. I am not an educated tourist—have read neither Black nor Murray, and I am very slow about taking in ideas. Even after all you have told me, I am not clear in my mind as to which is the castle and which the chapel, and which the burial-ground. Let us finish the afternoon dawdling about Tintagel. Let us see the sun set from this spot, where Arthur must so often have watched it, if the men of thirteen hundred years ago ever cared to watch the sun setting, which I doubt. They belong to the night-time of the world, when civilization was dead in Southern Europe, and was yet unborn in the West. Let us dawdle about till it is time to drive back to Mount Royal, and then I shall carry away an impression. I am very slow at taking impressions.'

'I think you want us to believe that you are stupid,' said Christabel, laughing at the earnestness with which he pleaded.

'Believe me, no. I should like you to think me ever so much better than I am. Please let us dawdle.'

They dawdled accordingly. Strolling about upon the short sea-beaten grass, so treacherous and slippery a surface in summer time, when fierce Sol has been baking it. They stumbled against the foundations of long-vanished walls, they speculated upon fragments of cyclopean masonry, and talked a great deal about the traditions of the spot.

Christabel, who had all the old authorities—Leland, Carew, and Norden—at her fingers' ends, was delighted to expound the departed glories of this British fortress. She showed where the ancient dungeon keep had reared its stony walls upon that 'high terrible crag, environed with the sea; and how there had once been a drawbridge uniting yonder cliff with the buildings on the mainland'—how divorced, as Carew says, 'by the downfallen steep cliffs, on the farther side, which, though it shut out the sea from his wonted recourse, hath yet more strengthened the island; for in passing thither you must first descend with a dangerous declining, and then make a worse ascent by a path, through his stickleness occasioning, and through his steepness threatening, the ruin of your life, with the falling of your foot.' She told Mr. Hamleigh how, after the Conquest, the castle was the occasional residence of some of our Princes, and how Richard King of the Romans, Earl of Cornwall, son of King John, entertained here his nephew David, Prince of Wales, how, in Richard the Second's time, this stronghold was made a State prison, and how a certain Lord Mayor of London was, for his unruly mayoralty, condemned thither as a perpetual penitentiary; which seems very hard upon the chief magistrate of the city, who thus did vicarious penance for the riot of his brief reign.

And then they talked of Tristan and Iseult, and the tender old love-story, which lends the glamour of old-world fancies to those bare ruins of a traditional past. Christabel knew the old chronicle through Matthew Arnold's poetical version, which gives only the purer and better side of the character of the Knight and Chatelaine, at the expense of some of the strongest features of the story. Who, that knew that romantic legend, could linger on that spot without thinking of King Marc's faithless queen! Assuredly not Mr. Hamleigh, who was a staunch believer in the inventor of 'sweetness and light,' and who knew Arnold's verses by heart.

'What have they done with the flowers and the terrace walks?' he said,—'the garden where Tristan and his Queen basked in the sunshine of their days; and where they parted for ever?—

'"All the spring time of their love
Is already gone and past,
And instead thereof is seen
Its winter, which endureth still—
Tyntagel, on its surge-beat hill,
The pleasaunce walks, the weeping queen,
The flying leaves, the straining blast,
And that long wild kiss—their last."

And where—oh, where—are those graves in the King's chapel in which the tyrant Marc, touched with pity, ordered the fated lovers to be buried? And, behold! out of the grave of Tristan there sprung a plant which went along the walls, and descended into the grave of the Queen, and though King Marc three several times ordered this magical creeper to be cut off root and branch, it was always found growing again next morning, as if it were the very spirit of the dead knight struggling to get free from the grave, and to be with his lady-love again! Show me those tombs, Miss Courtenay.'

'You can take your choice,' said Jessie Bridgeman, pointing to a green mound or two, overgrown with long rank grass, in that part of the hill which was said to be the kingly burial-place. 'But as for your magical tree, there is not so much as a bramble to do duty for poor Tristan.'

'If I were Duke of Cornwall and Lord of Tintagel Castle, I would put up a granite cross in memory of the lovers; though I fear there was very little Christianity in either of them,' said Angus.

'And I would come once a year and hang a garland on it,' said Christabel, smiling at him with

'Eyes of deep, soft, lucent hue—
Eyes too expressive to be blue,
Too lovely to be grey.'

He had recalled those lines more than once when he looked into Christabel's eyes.

Mr. Hamleigh had read so much as to make him an interesting talker upon any subject; but Christabel and Jessie noticed that of his own life, his ways and amusements, his friends, his surroundings, he spoke hardly at all. This fact Christabel noticed with wonder, Jessie with suspicion. If a man led a good wholesome life, he would surely be more frank and open—he would surely have more to say about himself and his associates.

They dawdled, and dawdled, till past four o'clock, and to none of the three did the hours so spent seem long; but they found that it would make them too late in their return to Mount Royal were they to wait for sundown before they turned their faces homewards; so while the day was still bright, Mr. Hamleigh consented to be guided by steep and perilous paths to the base of the rocky citadel, and then they strolled back to the Wharncliffe Arms, where Felix had been enjoying himself in the stable, and was now desperately anxious to get home, rattling up and down hill at an alarming rate, and not hinting at anybody's alighting to walk.

This was only one of many days spent in the same fashion. They walked next day to Trebarwith sands, up and down hills, which Mr. Hamleigh declared were steeper than anything he had ever seen in Switzerland; but he survived the walk, and his spirits seemed to rise with the exertion. This time Major Bree went with them—a capital companion for a country ramble, being just enough of a botanist, archæologist, and geologist, to leaven the lump of other people's ignorance, without being obnoxiously scientific. Mr. Hamleigh was delighted with that noble stretch of level sand, with the long rollers of the Atlantic tumbling in across the low rocks, and the bold headlands behind—spot beloved of marine painters—spot where the gulls and the shags hold their revels, and where man feels himself but a poor creature face to face with the lonely grandeur of sea, and cliff, and sky.

So rarely is that long stretch of yellow sand vulgarized by the feet of earth's multitudes, that one-half expects to see a procession of frolicsome sea-nymphs come dancing out of yonder cave, and wind in circling measures towards the crested wavelets, gliding in so softly under the calm clear day.

These were halcyon days—an Indian summer—balmy western zephyrs—sunny noontides—splendid sunsets—altogether the most beautiful autumn season that Angus Hamleigh had known, or at least, so it seemed to him—nay, even more than this, surely the most beautiful season of his life.

As the days went on, and day after day was spent in Christabel's company—almost as it were alone with her, for Miss Bridgeman and Major Bree were but as figures in the background—Angus felt as if he were at the beginning of a new life—a life filled with fresh interests, thoughts, hopes, desires, unknown and undreamed of in the former stages of his being. Never before had he lived a life so uneventful—never before had he been so happy. It surprised him to discover how simple are the elements of real content—how deep the charm of a placid existence among thoroughly loveable people! Christabel Courtenay was not the loveliest woman he had ever known, nor the most elegant, nor the most accomplished, nor the most fascinating! but she was entirely different from all other women with whom his lot had been cast. Her innocence, her unsophisticated enjoyment of all earth's purest joys, her transparent purity, her perfect trustfulness—these were to him as a revelation of a new order of beings. If he had been told of such a woman he would have shrugged his shoulders misbelievingly, or would have declared that she must be an idiot. But Christabel was quite as clever as those brilliant creatures whose easy manners had enchanted him in days gone by. She was better educated than many a woman he knew who passed for a wit of the first order. She had read more, thought more, was more sympathetic, more companionable, and she was delightfully free from self-consciousness or vanity.

He found himself talking to Christabel as he had never talked to anyone else since those early days at the University, the bright dawn of manhood, when he confided freely in that second self, the chosen friend of the hour, and believed that all men lived and moved according to his own boyish standard of honour. He talked to her, not of the actualities of his life, but of his thoughts and feelings—his dreamy speculations upon the gravest problems which hedge round the secret of man's final destiny. He talked freely of his doubts and difficulties, and the half-belief which came so near unbelief—the wide love of all creation—the vague yet passionate yearning for immortality which fell so far short of the Gospel's sublime certainty. He revealed to her all the complexities of a many-sided mind, and she never failed him in sympathy and understanding. This was in their graver moods, when by some accidental turn of the conversation they fell into the discussion of those solemn questions which are always at the bottom of every man and woman's thoughts, like the unknown depths of a dark water-pool. For the most part their talk was bright and light as those sunny autumn days, varied as the glorious and ever-changing hues of sky and sea at sunset. Jessie was a delightful companion. She was so thoroughly easy herself that it was impossible to feel ill at ease with her. She played her part of confidante so pleasantly, seeming to think it the most natural thing in the world that those two should be absorbed in each other, and should occasionally lapse into complete forgetfulness of her existence. Major Bree when he joined in their rambles was obviously devoted to Jessie Bridgeman. It was her neatly gloved little hand which he was eager to clasp at the crossing of a stile, and where the steepness of the hill-side path gave him an excuse for assisting her. It was her stout little boot which he guided so tenderly, where the ways were ruggedest. Never had a plain woman a more respectful admirer—never was beauty in her peerless zenith more devoutly worshipped!

And so the autumn days sped by, pleasantly for all: with deepest joy—joy ever waxing, never waning—for those two who had found the secret of perfect sympathy in thought and feeling. It was not for Angus Hamleigh the first passion of a spotless manhood; and yet the glamour and the delight were as new as if he had never loved before. He had never so purely, so reverently loved. The passion was of a new quality. It seemed to him as if he had ascended into a higher sphere in the universe, and had given his heart to a creature of a loftier race.

'Perhaps it is the good old lineage which makes the difference,' he said to himself once, while his feelings were still sufficiently novel and so far under his control as to be subject to analysis. 'The women I have cared for in days gone by have hardly got over their early affinity with the gutter; or when I have admired a woman of good family she has been steeped to the lips in worldliness and vanity.'

Mr. Hamleigh, who had told himself that he was going to be intensely bored at Mount Royal, had been Mrs. Tregonell's guest for three weeks, and it seemed to him as if the time were brief and beautiful as one of those rare dreams of impossible bliss which haunt our waking memories, and make actual life dull and joyless by contrast with the glory of shadowland. No word had yet been spoken—nay, at the very thought of those words which most lovers in his position would have been eager to speak, his soul sickened and his cheek paled; for there would be no joyfulness in the revelation of his love—indeed, he doubted whether he had the right to reveal it—whether duty and honour did not alike constrain him to keep his converse within the strict limits of friendship, to bid Christabel good-bye, and turn his back upon Mount Royal, without having said one word more than a friend might speak. Happy as Christabel had been with him—tenderly as she loved him—she was far too innocent to have considered herself ill-treated in such a case. She would have blamed herself alone for the weakness of mind which had been unable to resist the fascination of his society—she would have blushed and wept in secret for her folly in having loved unwooed.

'Has the eventful question been asked?' Jessie inquired one night, as Christabel lingered, after her wont, by the fire in Miss Bridgeman's bedroom. 'You two were so intensely earnest today as you walked ahead of the Major and me, that I said to myself, "now is the time—the crisis has arrived?"'

'There was no crisis,' answered Christabel, crimsoning; 'he has never said one word to me that can imply that I am any more to him than the most indifferent acquaintance.'

'What need of words when every look and tone cries 'I love you?' Why he idolizes you, and he lets all the world see it. I hope it may be well for you—both.'

Christabel was on her knees by the fire. She laid her cheek against Jessie's waistband, and drew Jessie's arm round her neck, holding her hand lovingly.

'Do you really think he—cares for me?' she faltered, with her face hidden.

'Do I really think that I have two eyes, and something which is at least an apology for a nose!' ejaculated Jessie, contemptuously. 'Why, it has been patent to everybody for the last fortnight that you two are over head and ears in love with each other. There never was a more obvious case of mutual infatuation.'

'Oh, Jessie! surely I have not betrayed myself. I know that I have been very weak—but I have tried so hard to hide ——'

'And have been about as successful as the ostrich. While those drooping lashes have been lowered to hide the love-light in your eyes, your whole countenance has been an illuminated calendar of your folly. Poor Belle! to think that she has not betrayed herself, while all Boscastle is on tiptoe to know when the wedding is to take place. Why the parson could not see you two sitting in the same pew without knowing that he would be reading your banns before he was many Sundays older.'

'And you—really—like him?' faltered Christabel, more shyly than before.

'Yes,' answered Jessie, with a provoking lack of enthusiasm. 'I really like him. I can't help feeling sorry for Mrs. Tregonell, for I know she wanted you to marry Leonard.'

Christabel gave a little sigh, and a faint shiver.

'Poor dear Leonard! I wonder what traveller's hardships he is enduring while we are so snug and happy at Mount Royal?' she said, kindly. 'He has an excellent heart——'

'Troublesome people always have, I believe,' interjected Jessie. 'It is their redeeming feature, the existence of which no one can absolutely disprove.'

'And I am very much attached to him—as a cousin—or as an adopted brother; but as to our ever being married—that is quite out of the question. There never were two people less suited to each other.'

'Those are the people who usually come together,' said Jessie; 'the Divorce Court could hardly be kept going if it were not so.'

'Jessie, if you are going to be cynical I shall say good-night. I hope there is no foundation for what you said just now. I hope that Auntie has no foolish idea about Leonard and me.'

'She has—or had—one prevailing idea, and I fear it will go hard with her when she has to relinquish it,' answered Jessie, seriously. 'I know that it has been her dearest hope to see you and Leonard married, and I should be a wretch if I were not sorry for her disappointment, when she has been so good to me. But she never ought to have invited Mr. Hamleigh to Mount Royal. That is one of those mistakes, the consequences of which last for a lifetime.'

'I hope he likes me—just a little,' pursued Christabel, with dreamy eyes fixed on the low wood fire; 'but sometimes I fancy there must be some mistake—that he does not really care a straw for me. More than once, when he has began to say something that sounded——'

'Business-like,' suggested Jessie, as the girl hesitated.

'He has drawn back—seeming almost anxious to recall his words. Once he told me—quite seriously—that he had made up his mind never to marry. Now, that doesn't sound as if he meant to marry *me*.'

'That is not an uncommon way of breaking ground,' answered Jessie, with her matter-of-fact air. 'A man tells a girl that he is going to die a bachelor—which makes it seem quite a favour on his part when he proposes. All women sigh for the unattainable; and a man who distinctly states that he is not in the market, is likely to make a better bargain when he surrenders.'

'I should be sorry to think Mr. Hamleigh capable of such petty ideas,' said Christabel. 'He told me once that he was like Achilles. Why should he be like Achilles? He is not a soldier.'

'Perhaps, it is because he has a Grecian nose,' suggested Miss Bridgeman.

'How can you imagine him so vain and foolish,' cried Christabel, deeply offended. 'I begin to think you detest him!'

'No, Belle, I think him charming, only too charming, and I had rather the man you loved were made of sterner metal—not such a man as Leonard, whose loftiest desires are centred in stable and gun-room; but a man of an altogether different type from Mr. Hamleigh. He has too much of the artistic temperament, without being an artist—he is too versatile, too soft-hearted and impressionable. I am afraid for you, Christabel, I am afraid; and if it were not too late—if your heart were not wholly given to him——'

'It is,' answered Christabel, tearfully, with her face hidden; 'I hate myself for being so foolish, but I have let myself love him. I know that I may never be his wife—I do not even think that he has any idea of marrying me—but I shall never marry any other man. Oh, Jessie! for pity's sake don't betray me; never let my aunt, or any one else in this world, learn what I have told you. I can't help trusting you—you wind yourself into my heart somehow, and find out all that is hidden there!'

'Because I love you truly and honestly, my dear,' answered Jessie, tenderly; 'and now, good-night; I feel sure that Mr. Hamleigh will ask you to be his wife, and I only wish he were a better man.'

CHAPTER IV.

'LOVE! THOU ART LEADING ME FROM WINTRY COLD.'

After this came two or three dull and showery days, which afforded no opportunity for long excursions or ramblings of any kind. It was only during such rambles that Mr. Hamleigh and Miss Courtenay ever found themselves alone. Mrs. Tregonell's ideas of propriety were of the old-fashioned school, and when her niece was not under her own wing, she expected Miss Bridgeman to perform all the duties of a duenna—in no wise suspecting how very loosely her instructions upon this point were being carried out. At Mount Royal there was no possibility of confidential talk between Angus and Christabel. If they were in the drawing-room or library, Mrs. Tregonell was with them; if they played billiards, Miss Bridgeman was told off to mark for them; if they went for a constitutional walk between the showers, or wasted half-an-hour in the stables looking at horses and dogs, Miss Bridgeman was bidden to accompany them; and though they had arrived at the point of minding her very little, and being sentimental and sympathetic under her very nose, still there are limits to the love-making that can be carried on before a third person, and a man would hardly care to propose in the presence of a witness. So for three days Christabel still remained in doubt as to Mr. Hamleigh's real feelings. That manner of making tender little speeches, and then, as it were, recalling them, was noticeable many times during those three days of domesticity. There was a hesitancy—an uncertainty in his attentions to Christabel which Jessie interpreted ill.

'There is some entanglement, I daresay,' she told herself; 'it is the evil of his past life which holds him in the toils. How do we know that he has not a wife hidden away somewhere? He ought to declare himself, or he ought to go away! If this kind of shilly-shallying goes on much longer he will break Christabel's heart.'

Miss Bridgeman was determined that, if it were in her power to hasten the crisis, the crisis should be hastened. The proprieties, as observed by Mrs. Tregonell, might keep matters in abeyance till Christmas. Mr. Hamleigh gave no hint of his departure. He might stay at Mount Royal for months sentimentalizing with Christabel, and ride off at the last uncompromised.

The fourth day was the feast of St. Luke. The weather had brightened considerably, but there was a high wind—a south-west wind, with occasional showers.

'Of course, you are going to church this morning,' said Jessie to Christabel, as they rose from the breakfast-table.

'Church this morning?' repeated Christabel, vaguely.

For the first time since she had been old enough to understand the services of her church, she had forgotten a Saint's Day.

'It is St. Luke's Day.'

'Yes, I remember. And the service is at Minster. We can walk across the hills.'

'May I go with you?' asked Mr. Hamleigh.

'Do you like week-day services?' inquired Jessie, with rather a mischievous sparkle in her keen grey eyes.

'I adore them,' answered Angus, who had not been inside a church on a week-day since he was best man at a friend's wedding.

'Then we will all go together,' said Jessie. 'May Brook bring the pony-carriage to fetch us home, Mrs. Tregonell? I have an idea that Mr. Hamleigh won't be equal to the walk home.'

'More than equal to twenty such walks!' answered Angus, gaily. 'You under-estimate the severity of the training to which I have submitted myself during the last three weeks.'

'The pony-carriage may as well meet you in any case,' said Mrs. Tregonell. And the order was straightway given.

They started at ten o'clock, giving themselves ample leisure for a walk of something over two miles—a walk by hill and valley, and rushing stream, and picturesque wooden bridge—through a deep gorge where the dark-red cattle were grouped against a background of gorse and heather—a walk of which one could never grow weary—so lonely, so beautiful, so perfect a blending of all that is wildest and all that is most gracious in Nature—an Alpine ramble on a small scale.

Minster Church lies in a hollow of the hill, so shut in by the wooded ridge which shelters its grey walls, that the stranger comes upon it as an architectural surprise.

'How is it you have never managed to finish your tower?' asked Mr. Hamleigh, surveying the rustic fane with a critical air, as he descended to the churchyard by some rugged stone steps on the side of the grassy hill. 'You cannot be a particularly devout people, or you would hardly have allowed your parish church to remain in this stunted and stinted condition.'

'There was a tower once,' said Christabel, naïvely; 'the stones are still in the churchyard; but the monks used to burn a light in the tower window—a light that shone through a cleft in the hills, and was seen far out at sea.'

'I believe that is geographically—or geometrically impossible,' said Angus laughing; 'but pray go on.'

'The light was often mistaken for a beacon, and the ships came ashore and were wrecked on the rocks.'

'Naturally—and no doubt the monks improved the occasion. Why should a Cornish monk be better than his countrymen? "One and all" is your motto.'

'They were not Cornish monks,' answered Christabel, 'but a brotherhood of French monks from the monastery of St. Sergius, at Angers. They were established in a Priory here by William de Bottreaux, in the reign of Richard, Cœur de Lion; and, according to tradition, the townspeople resented their having built the church so far from the town. I feel sure the monks could have had no evil intention in burning a light; but one night a crew of wild sailors attacked the tower, and pulled the greater part of it down.'

'And nobody in Boscastle has had public spirit enough to get it set up again. Where is your respect for those early Christian martyrs, St. Sergius and St. Bacchus, to whose memory your temple is dedicated?'

'I don't suppose it was so much want of respect for the martyrs as want of money,' suggested Miss Bridgeman. 'We have too many chapel people in Boscastle for our churches to be enriched or beautified. But Minster is not a bad little church after all.'

'It is the dearest, sweetest, most innocent little church I ever knelt in,' answered Angus; and if I could but assist at one particular service there ——'

He checked himself with a sigh; but this unfinished speech amounted in Miss Bridgeman's mind to a declaration. She stole a look at Christabel, whose fair face crimsoned for a moment or so, only to grow more purely pale afterwards.

They went into the church, and joined devoutly in the brief Saint's Day service. The congregation was not numerous. Two or three village goodies—the school children—a tourist, who had come to see the church, and found himself, as it were, entangled in saintly meshes—the lady who played the harmonium, and the incumbent who read prayers. These were all, besides the party from Mount Royal. There are plenty of people in country parishes who will be as pious as you please on Sunday, deeming three services not too much for their devotion, but who can hardly be persuaded to turn out of the beaten track of week-day life to offer homage to the memory of Evangelist or Apostle.

The pony-carriage was waiting in the lane when Mr. Hamleigh and the two ladies came out of the porch. Christabel and the gentleman looked at the equipage doubtfully.

'You slandered me, Miss Bridgeman, by your suggestion that I should be done up after a mile or so across the hills,' said Mr. Hamleigh; 'I never felt fresher in my life. Have you a hankering for the ribbons?' to Christabel; 'or will you send your pony back to his stable and walk home?'

'I would ever so much rather walk.'

'And so would I.'

'In that case, if you don't mind, I think I'll go home with Felix,' said Jessie Bridgeman, most unexpectedly. 'I am not feeling quite myself to-day, and the walk has tired me. You won't mind going home alone with Mr. Hamleigh, will you, Christabel? You might show him the seals in Pentargon Bay.'

What could Christabel do? If there had been anything in the way of an earthquake handy, she would have felt deeply grateful for a sudden rift in the surface of the soil, which would have allowed her to slip into the bosom of the hills, among the gnomes and the pixies. That Cornish coast was undermined with caverns, yet there was not one for her to drop into. Again, Jessie Bridgeman spoke in such an easy off-hand manner, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for Christabel and Mr. Hamleigh to be allowed a lonely ramble. To have refused, or even hesitated, would have seemed affectation, mock-modesty, self-consciousness. Yet Christabel almost involuntary made a step towards the carriage.

'I think I had better drive,' she said; 'Aunt Diana will be wanting me.'

'No, she won't,' replied Jessie, resolutely. 'And you shall not make a martyr of yourself for my sake. I know you love that walk over the hill, and Mr. Hamleigh is dying to see Pentargon Bay——'

'Positively expiring by inches; only it is one of those easy deaths that does not hurt one very much,' said Angus, helping Miss Bridgeman into her seat, giving her the reins, and arranging the rug over her knees with absolute tenderness.

'Take care of Felix,' pleaded Christabel; 'and if you trot down the hills trot fast.'

'I shall walk him every inch of the way. The responsibility would be too terrible otherwise.'

But Felix had his own mind in the matter, and had no intention of walking when the way he went carried him towards his stable. So he trotted briskly up the lane, between tall, tangled blackberry hedges, leaving Christabel and Angus standing at the churchyard gate. The rest of the little congregation had dispersed; the church door had been locked; there was a gravedigger at work in the garden-like churchyard, amidst long grasses and fallen leaves, and the unchanged ferns and mosses of the bygone summer.

Mr. Hamleigh had scarcely concealed his delight at Miss Bridgeman's departure, yet, now that she was gone, he looked passing sad. Never a word did he speak, as they two stood idly at the gate, listening to the dull thud of the earth which the gravedigger threw out of his shovel on to the grass, and the shrill sweet song of a robin, piping to himself on a ragged thorn-bush near at hand, as if in an ecstasy of gladness about things in general. One sound so fraught with melancholy, the other so full of joy! The contrast struck sharply on Christabel's nerves, to-day at their utmost tension, and brought sudden tears in her eyes.

They stood for perhaps five minutes in this dreamy silence, the robin piping all the while; and then Mr. Hamleigh roused himself, seemingly with an effort.

'Are you going to show me the seals at Pentargon?' he asked, smilingly.

'I don't know about seals—there is a local idea that seals are to be seen playing about in the bay; but one is not often so lucky as to find them there. People have been very cruel in killing them, and I'm afraid there are very few seals left on our coast now.'

'At any rate, you can show me Pentargon, if you are not tired.'

'Tired!' cried Christabel, laughing at such a ridiculous idea, being a damsel to whom ten miles were less than three to a town-bred young lady. Embarrassed though she felt by being left alone with Mr. Hamleigh, she could not even pretend that the proposed walk was too much for her.

'I shall be very glad to take you to Pentargon,' she said, 'it is hardly a mile out of our way; but I fear you'll be disappointed; there is really nothing particular to see.'

'I shall not be disappointed—I shall be deeply grateful.'

They walked along the narrow hill-side paths, where it was almost impossible for two to walk abreast; yet Angus contrived somehow to be at Christabel's side, guiding and guarding her by ways which were so much more familiar to her than to him, that there was a touch of humour in this pretence of protection. But Christabel did not see things in their humorous aspect to-day Her little hand trembled as it touched Angus Hamleigh's, when he led her across a craggy bit of path, or over a tiny water-pool At the stiles in the valley on the other side of the bridge, which are civilized stiles, and by no means difficult, Christabel was too quick and light of foot to give any opportunity for that assistance which her companion was so eager to afford. And now they were in the depths of the valley, and had to mount another hill, on the road to Bude, till they came to a field-gate, above which appeared a sign-board, and the mystic words, 'To Pentargon.'

'What is Pentargon, that they put up its name in such big letters?' asked Mr. Hamleigh, staring at the board. 'Is it a borough town—or a cattle market—or a cathedral city—or what? Them seem tremendously proud of it.'

'It is nothing—or only a shallow bay, with a waterfall and a wonderful cave, which I am always longing to explore. I believe it is nearly as beautiful as the cavern in Shelley's "Alastor." But you will see what Pentargon is like in less than five minutes.'

They crossed a ploughed field, and then, by a big five-barred gate, entered the magic region which was said to be the paradise of seals. A narrow walk cut in a steep and rocky bank, where the gorse and heather grew luxuriantly above slate and spar, described a shallow semicircle round one of the loveliest bays in the world—a spot so exquisitely tranquil in this calm autumn weather, so guarded and fenced in by the massive headlands that jutted out towards the main—a peaceful haven, seemingly so remote from that outer world to which belonged yonder white-winged ship on the verge of the blue—that Angus Hamleigh exclaimed involuntarily,—

'Here is peace! Surely this must be a bay in that Lotus land which Tennyson has painted for us!'

Hitherto their conversation had been desultory—mere fragmentary talk about the landscape and the loveliness of the autumn day, with its clear bright sky and soft west wind. They had been always in motion, and there had been a certain adventurousness in the way that seemed to give occupation to their thoughts. But now Mr. Hamleigh came to a dead stop, and stood looking at the rugged amphitheatre, and the low weedy rocks washed smooth by the sea.

'Would you mind sitting down for a few minutes?' he asked; 'this Pentargon of yours is a lovely spot, and I don't want to leave it instantly. I have a very slow appreciation of Nature. It takes me a long time to grasp her beauties.'

Christabel seated herself on the bank which he had selected for her accommodation, and Mr. Hamleigh placed himself a little lower, almost at her feet, her face turned seaward, his half towards her, as if that lily face, with its wild rose bloom, were even lovelier than the sunlit ocean in all its variety of colour.

'It is a delicious spot,' said Angus, 'I wonder whether Tristan and Iseult ever came here! I can fancy the queen stealing away from the Court and Court foolery, and walking across the sunlit hills with her lover. It would be rather a long walk, and there might be a difficulty about getting back in time for supper; but one can picture them wandering by flowery fields, or by the cliffs above that everlasting sea, and coming here to rest and talk of their sorrow and their love. Can you not fancy her as Matthew Arnold paints her?—

'"Let her have her youth again—
Let her be as she was then!
Let her have her proud dark eyes,
And her petulant, quick replies:
Let her sweep her dazzling hand,
With its gesture of command,
And shake back her raven hair
With the old imperious air."

I have an idea that the Hibernian Iseult must have been a tartar, though Matthew Arnold glosses over her peccadilloes so pleasantly. I wonder whether she had a strong brogue, and a sneaking fondness for usquebaugh.'

'Please, don't make a joke of her,' pleaded Christabel; 'she is very real to me. I see her as a lovely lady—tall and royal-looking, dressed in long robes of flowered silk, fringed with gold. And Tristan——'

'What of Tristan? Is his image as clear in your mind? How do you depict the doomed knight, born to suffer and to sin, destined to sorrow from the time of his forest-birth—motherless beset with enemies, consumed by hopeless passion. I hope you feel sorry for Tristan?'

'Who could help being sorry for him?'

'Albeit he was a sinner? I assure you, in the old romance which you have not read—which you would hardly care to read—neither Tristan nor Iseult are spotless.'

'I have never thought of their wrong-doing. Their fate was so sad, and they loved each other so truly.'

'And, again, you can believe, perhaps—you who are so innocent and confiding—that a man who has sinned may forsake the old evil ways and lead a good life, until every stain of that bygone sin is purified. You can believe, as the Greeks believed, in atonement and purification.'

'I believe, as I hope all Christians do, that repentance can wash away sin.'

'Even the accusing memory of wrong-doing, and make a man's soul white and fair again? That is a beautiful creed.'

'I think the Gospel gives us warrant for believing as much—not as some of the Dissenters teach, that one effort of faith, an hour of prayer and ejaculation, can transform a murderer into a saint; but that earnest, sustained regret for wrong-doing, and a steady determination to live a better life——'

'Yes—that is real repentance,' exclaimed Angus, interrupting her. 'Common sense, even without Gospel light, tells one that it must be good. Christabel—may I call you Christabel?—just for this one isolated half-hour of life—here in Pentargon Bay? You shall be Miss Courtenay directly we leave this spot.'

'Call me what you please. I don't think it matters very much,' faltered Christabel, blushing deeply.

'But it makes all the difference to me. Christabel, I can't tell you how sweet it is to me just to pronounce your name. If—if—I could call you by that name always, or by a name still nearer and dearer. But you must judge. Give me half-an-hour—half-an-hour of heartfelt earnest truth on my side, and pitying patience on yours. Christabel, my past life has not been what a stainless Christian would call a good life. I have not been so bad as Tristan. I have violated no sacred charge—betrayed no kinsman. I suppose I have been hardly worse than the common run of young men, who have the means of leading an utterly useless life. I have lived selfishly, unthinkingly—caring for my own pleasure—with little thought of anything that was to come afterwards, either on earth or in heaven. But all that is past and done with. My wild oats are sown; I have had enough of youth and folly. When I came to Cornwall the other day I thought that I was on the threshold of middle age, and that middle age could give me nothing but a few years of pain and weariness. But—behold a miracle!—you have given me back my youth—youth and hope, and a desire for length of days, and a passionate yearning to lead a new, bright, stainless life. You have done all this, Christabel. I love you as I never thought it possible to love! I believe in you as I never before believed in woman—and yet—and yet——'

He paused, with a long heart-broken sigh, clasped the girl's hand, which had been straying idly among the faded heather, and pressed it to his lips.

'And yet I dare not ask you to be my wife. Shall I tell you why?'

'Yes, tell me,' she faltered, her cheeks deadly pale, her lowered eyelids heavy with tears

'I told you I was like Achilles, doomed to an early death. You remember with what pathetic tendreness Thetis speaks of her son,

'"Few years are thine, and not a lengthened term;
At once to early death and sorrows doomed
Beyond the lot of man!"

The Fates have spoken about me quite as plainly as ever the sea-nymph foretold the doom of her son. He was given the choice of length of days or glory, and he deemed fame better than long life. But my life has been as inglorious as it must be brief. Three months ago, one of the wisest of physicians pronounced my doom. The hereditary malady which for the last fifty years has been the curse of my family shows itself by the clearest indications in my case. I could have told the doctor this just as well as he told me; but it is best to have official information. I may die before I am a year older; I may crawl on for the next ten years—a fragile hot-house plant, sent to winter under southern skies.'

'And you may recover, and be strong and well again!' cried Christabel, in a voice choked with sobs. She made no pretence of hiding her pity or her love. 'Who can tell? God is so good. What prayer will He not grant us if we only believe in Him? Faith will remove mountains.'

'I have never seen it done,' said Angus. 'I'm afraid that no effort of faith in this degenerate age will give a man a new lung. No, Christabel, there is no chance of long life for me. If hope—if love could give length of days, my new hopes, born of you—my new love felt for you, might work that miracle. But I am the child of my century: I only believe in the possible. And knowing that my years are so few, and that during that poor remnant of life I may be a chronic invalid, how can I—how dare I be so selfish as to ask any girl—young, fresh, and bright, with all the joys of life untasted—to be the companion of my decline? The better she loved me, the sadder would be her life—the keener would be the anguish of watching my decay!'

'But it would be a life spent with you, her days would be devoted to you; if she really loved you, she would not hesitate,' pursued Christabel, her hands clasped passionately, tears streaming down her pale cheeks, for this moment to her was the supreme crisis of fate. 'She would be unhappy, but there would be sweetness even in her sorrow if she could believe that she was a comfort to you!'

'Christabel, don't tempt me! Ah, my darling! you don't know how selfish a man's love is, how sweet it would be to me to snatch such bliss, even on the brink of the dark gulf—on the threshold of the eternal night, the eternal silence! Consider what you would take upon yourself—you who perhaps have never known what sickness means—have never seen the horrors of mortal disease.'

'Yes, I have sat with some of our poor people when they were dying. I have seen how painful disease is, how cruel Nature seems, and how hard it is for a poor creature racked with pain to believe in God's beneficence; but even then there has been comfort in being able to help them and cheer them a little. I have thought more of that than of the actual misery of the scene.'

'But to give all your young life—all your days and thoughts and hopes to a doomed man! Think of that, Christabel! When you are happy with him to see Death grinning behind his shoulder—to watch that spectacle which is of all Nature's miseries the most awful—the slow decay of human life—a man dying by inches—not death, but dissolution? If my malady were heart-disease, and you knew that at some moment—undreamt of—unlooked for—death would come, swift as an arrow from Hecate's bow, brief, with no loathsome or revolting detail—then I might say, "Let us spend my remnant of life together." But consumption, you cannot tell what a painful ending that is! Poets and novelists have described it as a kind of euthanasia; but the poetical mind is rarely strong in scientific knowledge. I want you to understand all the horror of a life spent with a chronic sufferer, about whom the cleverest physician in London has made up his mind.'

'Answer me one question,' said Christabel, drying her tears, and trying to steady her voice. 'Would your life be any happier if we were together—till the end?'

'Happier? It would be a life spent in Paradise. Pain and sickness could hardly touch me with their sting.'

'Then let me be your wife.'

'Christabel, are you in earnest? have you considered?'

'I consider nothing, except that it may be in my power to make your life a little happier than it would be without me. I want only to be sure of that. If the doom were more dreadful than it is—if there were but a few short months of life left for you, I would ask you to let me share them; I would ask to nurse you and watch you in sickness. There would be no other fate on earth so full of sweetness for me. Yes, even with death and everlasting mourning waiting for me at the end.'

'My Christabel, my beloved! my angel, my comforter! I begin to believe in miracles. I almost feel as if you could give me length of years, as well as bliss beyond all thought or hope of mine. Christabel, Christabel, God forgive me if I am asking you to wed sorrow; but you have made this hour of my life an unspeakable ecstasy. Yet I will not take you quite at your word, love. You shall have time to consider what you are going to do—time to talk to your aunt.'

'I want no time for consideration. I will be guided by no one. I think God meant me to love you—and cure you.'

'I will believe anything you say; yes, even if you promise me a new lung. God bless you, my beloved! You belong to those whom He does everlastingly bless, who are so angelic upon this earth that they teach us to believe in heaven. My Christabel, my own! I promised to call you Miss Courtenay when we left Pentargon, but I suppose now you are to be Christabel for the rest of my life!'

'Yes, always.'

'And all this time we have not seen a single seal!' exclaimed Angus, gaily.

His delicate features were radiant with happiness. Who could at such a moment remember death and doom? All painful words which need be said had been spoken.

CHAPTER V.

'THE SILVER ANSWER RANG,—"NOT DEATH, BUT LOVE."'

Mrs. Tregonell and her niece were alone together in the library half-an-hour before afternoon tea, when the autumn light was just beginning to fade, and the autumn mist to rise ghost-like from the narrow little harbour of Boscastle. Miss Bridgeman had contrived that it should be so, just as she had contrived the visit to the seals that morning.

So Christabel, kneeling by her aunt's chair in the fire-glow, just as she had knelt upon the night before Mr. Hamleigh's coming, with faltering lips confessed her secret.

'My dearest, I have known it for ever so long,' answered Mrs. Tregonell, gravely, laying her slender hand, sparkling with hereditary rings—never so gorgeous as the gems bought yesterday—on the girl's sunny hair. 'I cannot say that I am glad. No, Christabel, I am selfish enough to be sorry, for Leonard's sake, that this should have happened. It was the dream of my life that you two should marry.'

'Dear aunt, we could never have cared for each other—as lovers. We had been too much like brother and sister.'

'Not too much for Leonard to love you, as I know he does. He was too confident—too secure of his power to win you. And I, his mother, have brought a rival here—a rival who has stolen your love from my son.'

'Don't speak of him bitterly, dearest. Remember he is the son of the man you loved.'

'But not my son! Leonard must always be first in my mind. I like Angus Hamleigh. He is all that his father was—yes—it is almost a painful likeness—painful to me, who loved and mourned his father. But I cannot help being sorry for Leonard.'

'Leonard shall be my dear brother, always,' said Christabel; yet even while she spoke it occurred to her that Leonard was not quite the kind of person to accept the fraternal position pleasantly, or, indeed, any secondary character whatever in the drama of life.

'And when are you to be married?' asked Mrs. Tregonell, looking at the fire.

'Oh, Auntie, do you suppose I have begun to think of that yet awhile?'

'Be sure that he has, if you have not! I hope he is not going to be in a hurry. You were only nineteen last birthday.

'I feel tremendously old,' said Christabel. 'We—we were talking a little about the future, this afternoon, in the billiard-room, and Angus talked about the wedding being at the beginning of the new year. But I told him I was sure you would not like that.'

'No, indeed! I must have time to get reconciled to my loss,' answered the dowager, with her arm drawn caressingly round Christabel's head, as the girl leaned against her aunt's chair. 'What will this house seem to me without my daughter? Leonard far away, putting his life in peril for some foolish sport, and you living—Heaven knows where; for you would have to study your husband's taste, not mine, in the matter.'

'Why shouldn't we live near you? Mr. Hamleigh might buy a place. There is generally something to be had if one watches one's opportunity.'

'Do you think he would care to sink his fortune, or any part of it, in a Cornish estate, or to live amidst these wild hills?'

'He says he adores this place.'

'He is in love, and would swear as much of a worse place. No, Belle, I am not foolish enough to suppose that you and Mr. Hamleigh are to settle for life at the end of the world. This house shall be your home whenever you choose to occupy it; and I hope you will come and stay with me sometimes, for I shall be very lonely without you.'

'Dear Auutie, you know how I love you; you know how completely happy I have been with you—how impossible it is that anything can ever lessen my love.'

'I believe that, dear girl; but it is rarely nowadays that Ruth follows Naomi. Our modern Ruths go where their lovers go, and worship the same gods. But I don't want to be selfish or unjust, dear. I will try to rejoice in your happiness. And if Angus Hamleigh will only be a little patient; if he will give me time to grow used to the loss of you, he shall have you with your adopted mother's blessing.'

'He shall not have me without it,' said Christabel, looking up at her aunt with steadfast eyes.

She had said no word of that early doom of which Angus had told her. For worlds she could not have revealed that fatal truth. She had tried to put away every thought of it while she talked with her aunt. Angus had urged her beforehand to be perfectly frank, to tell Mrs. Tregonell what a mere wreck of a life it was which her lover offered her: but she had refused.

'Let that be our secret,' she said, in her low, sweet voice. 'We want no one's pity. We will bear our sorrow together. And, oh, Angus! my faith is so strong. God, who has made me so happy by the gift of your love, will not take you from me. If—if your life is to be brief, mine will not be long.'

'My dearest! if the gods will it so, we will know no parting, but be translated into some new kind of life together—a modern Baucis and Philemon. I think it would be wiser—better, to tell your aunt everything. But if you think otherwise'———

'I will tell her nothing, except that you love me, and that, with her consent, I am going to be your wife;' and with this determination Christabel had made her confession to her aunt.

The ice once broken, everybody reconciled herself or himself to the new aspect of affairs at Mount Royal. In less than a week it seemed the most natural thing in life that Angus and Christabel should be engaged. There was no marked change in their mode of life. They rambled upon the hills, and went boating on fine mornings, exploring that wonderful coast where the sea-birds congregate, on rocky isles and fortresses rising sheer out of the sea—in mighty caves, the very tradition whereof sounds terrible—caves that seem to have no ending, but to burrow into unknown, unexplored regions, towards the earth's centre.

With Major Bree for their skipper, and a brace of sturdy boatmen, Angus, Christabel, and Jessie Bridgeman spent several mild October mornings on the sea—now towards Cambeak, anon towards Trebarwith. Tintagel from the beach was infinitely grander than Tintagel in its landward aspect. 'Here,' as Norden says, was 'that rocky and winding way up the steep sea-cliff, under which the sea-waves wallow, and so assail the foundation of the isle, as may astonish an unstable brain to consider the peril, for the least slip of the foot leads the whole body into the devouring sea.'

To climb these perilous paths, to spring from rock to rock upon the slippery beach, landing on some long green slimy slab over which the sea washes, was Christabel's delight—and Mr. Hamleigh showed no lack of agility or daring. His health had improved marvellously in that invigorating air. Christabel, noteful of every change of hue in the beloved face, saw how much more healthy a tinge cheek and brow had taken since Mr. Hamleigh came to Mount Royal. He had no longer the exhausted look or the languid air of a man who had untimely squandered his stock of life and health. His eye had brightened—with no hectic light, but with the clear sunshine of a mind at ease. He was altered in every way for the better

And now the autumn evenings were putting on a wintry air—the lights were twinkling early in the Alpine street of Boscastle. The little harbour was dark at five o'clock. Mr. Hamleigh had been nearly two months at Mount Royal, and he told himself that it was time for leave-taking. Fain would he have stayed on—stayed until that blissful morning when Christabel and he might kneel, side by side, before the altar in Minster Church, and be made one for ever—one in life and death—in a union as perfect as that which was symbolized by the plant that grew out of Tristan's tomb and went down into the grave of his mistress.

Unhappily, Mrs. Tregonell had made up her mind that her niece should not be married until she was twenty years of age—and Christabel's twentieth birthday would not arrive till the following Midsummer. To a lover's impatience so long an interval seemed an eternity; but Mrs. Tregonell had been very gracious in her consent to his betrothal, so he could not disobey her.

'Christabel has seen so little of the world,' said the dowager. 'I should like to give her one season in London before she marries—just to rub off a little of the rusticity.'

'She is perfect—I would not have her changed for worlds,' protested Angus.

'Nor I. But she ought to know a little more of society before she has to enter it as your wife. I don't think a London season will spoil her—and it will please me to chaperon her—though I have no doubt I shall seem rather an old-fashioned chaperon.'

'That is just possible,' said Angus, smiling, as he thought how closely his divinity was guarded. 'The chaperons of the present day are very easy-going people—or, perhaps I ought to say, that the young ladies of the present day have a certain Yankee go-a-headishness which very much lightens the chaperon's responsibility. In point of fact, the London chaperon has dwindled into a formula, and no doubt she will soon be improved off the face of society.'

'So much the worse for society,' answered the lady of the old school. And then she continued, with a friendly air,—

'I dare say you know that I have a house in Bolton Row. I have not lived in it since my husband's death — but it is mine, and I can have it made comfortable between this and the early spring. I have been thinking that it would be better for you and Christabel to be married in London. The law business would be easier settled—and you may have relations and friends who would like to be at your wedding, yet who would hardly care to come to Boscastle.'

'It *is* a long way,' admitted Angus. 'And people are so inconsistent. They think nothing of going to the Engadine, yet grumble consumedly at a journey of a dozen hours in their native land—as if England were not worth the exertion.'

'Then I think we are agreed that London is the best place for the wedding,' said Mrs. Tregonell.

'I am perfectly content. But if you suggested Timbuctoo I should be just as happy.'

This being settled, Mrs. Tregonell wrote at once to her agent, with instructions to set the old house in Bolton Row in order for the season immediately after Easter, and Christabel and her lover had to reconcile their minds to the idea of a long dreary winter of severance.

Miss Courtenay had grown curiously grave and thoughtful since her engagement—a change which Jessie, who watched her closely, observed with some surprise. It seemed as if she had passed from girlhood into womanhood in the hour in which she pledged herself to Angus Hamleigh. She had for ever done with the thoughtless gaiety of youth that knows not care. She had taken upon herself the burden of an anxious, self-sacrificing love. To no one had she spoken of her lover's precarious hold upon life; but the thought of by how frail a tenure she held her happiness was ever present with her. 'How can I be good enough to him?—how can I do enough to make his life happy?' she thought, 'when it may be for so short a time.'

With this ever-present consciousness of a fatal future, went the desire to make her lover forget his doom, and the ardent hope that the sentence might be revoked—that the doom pronounced by human judgment might yet be reversed. Indeed, Angus had himself begun to make light of his malady. Who could tell that the famous physician was not a false prophet, after all? The same dire announcement of untimely death had been made to Leigh Hunt, who contrived somehow—not always in the smoothest waters—to steer his frail bark into the haven of old age. Angus spoke of this, hopefully, to Christabel, as they loitered within the roofless crumbling walls of the ancient oratory above St. Nectan's Kieve, one sunny November morning, Miss Bridgeman rambling on the crest of the hill, with the black sheep-dog, Randie, under the polite fiction of blackberry hunting, among hedges which had long been shorn of their last berry, though the freshness of the lichens and ferns still lingered in this sheltered nook.

'Yes, I know that cruel doctor was mistaken!' said Christabel, her lips quivering a little, her eyes wide and grave, but tearless, as they gazed at her lover. 'I know it, I know it!'

'I know that I am twice as strong and well as I was when he saw me,' answered Angus: 'you have worked as great a miracle for me as ever was wrought at the grave of St. Mertheriana in Minster Churchyard. You have made me happy; and what can cure a man better than perfect bliss? But, oh, my darling! what is to become of me when I leave you, when I return to the beaten ways of London life, and, looking back at these delicious days, ask myself if this sweet life with you is not some dream which I have dreamed, and which can never come again?'

'You will not think anything of the kind,' said Christabel, with a pretty little air of authority which charmed him—as all her looks and ways charmed him. 'You know that I am sober reality, and that our lives are to be spent together. And you are not going back to London—at least not to stop there. You are going to the South of France.'

'Indeed? this is the first I have heard of any such intention.'

'Did not that doctor say you were to winter in the South?'

'He did. But I thought we had agreed to despise that doctor?'

'We will despise him, yet be warned by him Why should any one, who has liberty and plenty of money, spend his winter in a smoky city, where the fog blinds and stifles him, and the frost pinches him, and the damp makes him miserable, when he can have blue skies, and sunshine and flowers, and ever so much brighter stars, a few hundred miles away? We are bound to obey each other, are we not, Angus? Is not that among our marriage vows?'

'I believe there is something about obedience—on the lady's side—but I waive that technicality. I am prepared to become an awful example of a henpecked husband. If you say I am to go southwards, with the swallows, I will go—yea, verily, to Algeria or Tunis, if you insist; though I would rather be on the Riviera, whence a telegram, with the single word 'Come' would bring me to your side in forty-eight hours.'

'Yes, you will go to that lovely land on the shores of the Mediterranean, and there you will be very careful of your health, so that when we meet in London, after Easter, your every look will gainsay that pitiless doctor. Will you do this, for my sake, Angus?' she pleaded, lovingly, nestling at his side, as they stood together on a narrow path that wound down to the entrance of the Kieve. They could hear the rush of the waterfall in the deep green hollow below them, and the faint flutter of loosely hanging leaves, stirred lightly by the light wind, and far away the joyous bark of a sheep-dog. No human voices, save their own, disturbed the autumnal stillness.

'This, and much more, would I do to please you, love. Indeed, if I am not to be here, I might just as well be in the South; nay, much better than in London, or Paris, both of which cities I know by heart. But don't you think we could make a compromise, and that I might spend the winter at Torquay, running over to Mount Royal for a few days occasionally?'

'No; Torquay will not do, delightful as it would be to have you so near. I have been reading about the climate in the South of France, and I am sure, if you are careful, a winter there will do you worlds of good. Next year——'

'Next year we can go there together, and you will take care of me. Was that what you were going to say, Belle?'

'Something like that.'

'Yes,' he said, slowly, after a thoughtful pause, 'I shall be glad to be away from London, and all old associations. My past life is a worthless husk that I have done with for ever.'

CHAPTER VI.

IN SOCIETY.

THE Easter recess was over. Society had returned from its brief holiday—its glimpse of budding hedges and primrose-dotted banks, blue skies and blue violets, the snowy bloom of orchards, the tender green of young cornfields. Society had come back again, and was hard at the London treadmill—yawning at old operas, and damning new plays—sniggering at crowded soirées—laying down the law, each man his particular branch thereof, at carefully planned dinner parties—quarrelling and making friends again—eating and drinking—spending and wasting, and pretending to care very little about anything; for society is as salt that has lost its savour if it is not cynical and affected.

But there was one *débutante* at least that season for whom town pleasures had lost none of their freshness, for whom the old operas were all melody, and the new plays all wit—who admired everything with frankest wonder and enthusiasm, and without a thought of Horace, or Pope, or Creech, or anybody, except the lover who was always at her side, and who shed the rose-coloured light of happiness upon the commonest things. To sit in the Green Park on a mild April morning, to see the guard turn out by St. James's Palace after breakfast, to loiter away an hour or two at a picture gallery—was to be infinitely happy. Neither opera nor play, dinner nor dance, race-course nor flower-show, was needed to complete the sum of Christabel's bliss when Angus Hamleigh was with her.

He had returned from Hyères, quietest among the southern towns, wonderfully improved in health and strength. Even Mrs. Tregonell and Miss Bridgeman perceived the change in him.

'I think you must have been very ill when you came to Mount Royal, Mr. Hamleigh,' said Jessie, one day. 'You look so much better now.'

'My life was empty then — it is full now, he answered. 'It is hope that keeps a man alive, and I had very little to hope for when I went westward. How strange the road of life is! and how little a man knows what is waiting for him round the corner!'

The house in Bolton Row was charming; just large enough to be convenient, just small enough to be snug. At the back, the windows looked into Lord Somebody's garden — not quite a tropical paradise—nay, even somewhat flavoured with bricks and mortar—but still a garden, where, by sedulous art, the gardeners kept alive ferns and flowers, and where trees, warranted to resist smoke, put forth young leaves in the springtime, and only languished and sickened in untimely decay when the London season was over, and their function as fashionable trees had been fulfilled.

The house was furnished in a Georgian style, pleasant to modern taste. The drawing-room was of the spindle-legged order—satin-wood card tables; groups of miniatures in oval frames; Japanese folding screen, behind which Belinda might have played Bo-peep; china jars, at whose fall Narcissa might have inly suffered, while outwardly serene. The dining-room was sombre and substantial. The bedrooms had been improved by modern upholstery, for the sleeping apartments of our ancestors leave a good deal to be desired. All the windows were full of flowers — inside and out there was the perfume and colour of many blossoms. The three drawing-rooms, growing smaller to a diminishing point, like a practical lesson in perspective, were altogether charming.

Major Bree had escorted the ladies to London, and was their constant guest, camping out in a bachelor lodging in Jermyn Street, and coming across Piccadilly every day to eat his luncheon in Bolton Row, and to discuss the evening's engagements.

Long as he had been away from London, he acclimatized himself very quickly—found out everything about everybody—what singers were best worth hearing—what plays were best worth seeing—what actors should be praised—which pictures should be looked at and talked about—what horses were likely to win the notable races. He was a walking guide, a living handbook to fashionable London.

All Mrs. Tregonell's old friends—all the Cornish people who came to London—called in Bolton Row; and at every house where the lady and her niece visited there were new introductions, whereby the widow's visiting list widened like a circle in the water—and cards for dances and evening parties, afternoons and dinners were super-abundant. Christabel wanted to see everything. She had quite a country girl's taste, and cared much for the theatre and the opera than to be dressed in a new gown, and to be crushed in a crowd of other young women in new gowns—or to sit still and be admired at a stately dinner. Nor was she particularly interested in the leaders of fashion, their ways and manners—the newest professed or professional beauty—the last social scandal. She wanted to see the great city of which she had read in history—the Tower, the Savoy, Westminster Hall, the Abbey, St. Paul's, the Temple—the London of Elizabeth, the still older London of the Edwards and Henries, the house in which Milton was born, the organ on which he played, the place where Shakespeare's Theatre once stood, the old Inn whence Chaucer's Pilgrims started on their journey. Even Dickens's London—the London of Pickwick and Winkle—the Saracen's Head at which Mr. Squeers put up—had charms for her.

'Is everything gone?' she asked, piteously, after being told how improvement had effaced the brick and mortar background of English History.

Yet there still remained enough to fill her mind with solemn thoughts of the past. She spent long hours in the Abbey, with Angus and Jessie, looking at the monuments, and recalling the lives and deeds of long vanished heroes and statesmen. The Tower, and the old Inns of Court, were full of interest. Her curiosity about old houses and streets was insatiable.

'No one less than Macaulay could satisfy you,' said Angus, one day, when his memory was at fault. 'A man of infinite reading, and infallible memory.'

'But you have read so much, and you remember a great deal.'

They had been prowling about the Whitehall end of the town in the bright early morning, before Fashion had begun to stir herself faintly among her down pillows. Christabel loved the parks and streets while the freshness of sunrise was still upon them—and these early walks were an institution.

'Where is the Decoy?' she asked Angus, one day, in St. James's Park; and on being interrogated, it appeared that she meant a certain piece of water, described in 'Peveril of the Peak.' All this part of London was peopled with Scott's heroes and heroines, or with suggestions of Goldsmith. Here Fenella danced before good-natured, loose-living Rowley. Here Nigel stood aside, amidst the crowd, to see Charles, Prince of Wales, and his ill-fated favourite, Buckingham, go by. Here the Citizen of the World met Beau Tibbs and the gentleman in black. For Christabel the Park was like a scene in a stage play.

Then, after breakfast, there were long drives into fair suburban haunts, where they escaped in some degree from London smoke and London restraints of all kinds, where they could charter a boat, and row up the river to a still fairer scene, and picnic in some rushy creek, out of ken of society, and be almost as recklessly gay as if they had been at Tintagel.

These were the days Angus loved best. The days upon which he and his betrothed turned their backs upon London society, and seemed as far away from the outside world as ever they had been upon the wild western coast. Like most men educated at Eton and Oxford, and brought up in the neighbourhood of the metropolis, Angus loved the Thames with a love that was almost a passion.

'It is my native country,' he said; 'I have no other. All the pleasantest associations of my boyhood and youth are interwoven with the river. When I die, my spirit ought to haunt these shores, like that ghost of the 'Scholar Gipsy,' which you have read about in Arnold's poem.'

He knew every bend and reach of the river—every tributary, creek, and eyot—almost every row of pollard willows, standing stunted and grim along the bank, like a line of rugged old men. He knew where the lilies grew, and where there were chances of trout. The haunts of monster pike were familiar to him—indeed, he declared that he knew many of these gentlemen personally—that they were as old as the Fontainebleau carp, and bore a charmed life.

'When I was at Eton I knew them all by sight,' he said. 'There was one which I set my heart upon landing, but he was ever so much stronger and cleverer than I. If I had caught him I should have worn his skin ever after, in the pride of my heart, like Hercules with his lion. But he still inhabits the same creek, still sulks among the same rushes, and devours the gentler members of the finny race by shoals. We christened him Dr. Parr, for we knew he was preternaturally old, and we thought he must, from mere force of association, be a profound scholar.'

Mr. Hamleigh was always finding reasons for these country excursions, which he declared were the one sovereign antidote for the poisoned atmosphere of crowded rooms, and the evil effects of late hours.

'You wouldn't like to see Christabel fade and languish like the flowers in your drawing-room,' he urged, when Mrs. Tregonell wanted her niece to make a round of London visits, instead of going down to Maidenhead on the coach, to lunch somewhere up the river. Not at Skindle's, or at any other hotel, but in the lazy sultry quiet of some sequestered nook below the hanging woods of Clieveden. 'I'm sure you can spare her just for to-day—such a perfect spring day. It would be a crime to waste such sunlight and such balmy air in town drawing-rooms. Could not you strain a point, dear Mrs. Tregonell, and come with us?"

Aunt Diana shook her head. No, the fatigue would be too much—she had lived such a quiet life at Mount Royal, that a very little exertion tired her. Besides she had some calls to make ; and then there was a dinner at Lady Bulteel's, to which she must take Christabel, and an evening party afterwards.

Christabel shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

'I am beginning to hate parties,' she said. 'They are amusing enough when one is in them—but they are all alike—and it would be so much nicer for us to live our own lives, and go wherever Angus likes. Don't you think you might defer the calls, and come with us to-day, Auntie dear ?'

Auntie dear shook her head.

'Even if I were equal to the fatigue, Belle, I couldn't defer my visits. Thursday is Lady Onslow's day—and Mrs. Trevannion's day—and Mrs. Vansittart's day—and when people have been so wonderfully kind to us, it would be uncivil not to call.'

'And you will sit in stifling drawing-rooms, with the curtains lowered to shut out the sunlight—and you will drink ever so much more tea than is good for you—and hear a lot of people prosing about the same things over and over again—Epsom and the Opera—and Mrs. This and Miss That—and Mrs. Somebody's new book, which everybody reads and talks about, just as if there were not another book in the world, or as if the old book counted for nothing,' concluded Christabel, contemptuously, having by this time discovered the conventional quality of kettle-drum conversations, wherein people discourse authoritatively about books they have not read, plays they have not seen, and people they do not know.

Mr. Hamleigh had his own way, and carried off Christabel and Miss Bridgeman to the White Horse Cellar, with the faithful Major in attendance.

'You will bring Belle home in time to dress for Lady Bulteel's dinner,' said Mrs. Tregonell, impressively, as they were departing. 'Mind, Major, I hold you responsible for her return. You are the only sober person in the party. I believe Jessie Bridgeman is as wild as a hawk, when she gets out of my sight.'

Jessie's shrewd grey eyes twinkled at the reproof.

'I am not very sorry to get away from Bolton Row, and the fine ladies who come to see you—and who always look at me as much as to say, "Who is she ?—what is she ?—how did she come here ?"—and who are obviously surprised if I say anything intelligent—first, at my audacity in speaking before company, and next that such a thing as I should have any brains.'

'Nonsense, Jessie, how thin-skinned you are ; everybody praises you,' said Mrs. Tregonell, while they all waited on the threshold for Christabel to fasten her eight-button gloves—a delicate operation, in which she was assisted by Mr. Hamleigh.

'How clever you are at buttoning gloves,' exclaimed Christabel; 'one would think you had served an apprenticeship.'

'That's not the first pair he has buttoned, I'll wager,' cried the Major, in his loud, hearty voice; and then, seeing Angus redden ever so slightly, and remembering certain rumours which he had heard at his club, the kindly bachelor regretted his speech.

Happily, Christabel was engaged at this moment in kissing her aunt, and did not observe Mr. Hamleigh's heightened colour. Ten minutes later they were all seated outside the coach, bowling down Piccadilly Hill on their way westward.

'In the good old days this is how you would have started for Cornwall,' said Angus.

'I wish we were going to Cornwall now.'

'So do I, if your aunt would let us be married at that dear little church in the glen. Christabel, when I die, if you have the ordering of my funeral, be sure that I am buried in Minster Churchyard.'

'Angus, don't,' murmured Christabel, piteously.

'Dearest, "we must all die— 'tis an inevitable chance—the first Statute in Magna Charta—it is an everlasting Act of Parliament"—that's what he says of death, dear, who jested at all things, and laid his cap and bells down one day in a lodging in Bond Street—the end of which we passed just now—sad and lonely, and perhaps longing for the kindred whom he had forsaken.'

'You mean Sterne,' said Christabel. 'Jessie and I hunted for that house, yesterday. I think we all feel sorrier for him than for many a better man.'

In the early afternoon they had reached their destination—a lovely creek shaded by chestnut and alder—a spot known to few, and rarely visited. Here, under green leaves, they moored their boat, and lunched on the contents of a basket which had been got ready for them at Skindle's—dawdling over the meal—taking their ease—full of talk and laughter. Never had Angus looked better, or talked more gaily. Jessie, too, was at her brightest, and had a great deal to say.

'It is wonderful how well you two get on,' said Christabel, smiling at her friend's prompt capping of some bitter little speech from Angus. 'You always seem to understand each other so quickly—indeed, Jessie seems to know what Angus is going to say before the words are spoken. I can see it in her face.'

'Perhaps, that is because we are both cynics,' said Mr. Hamleigh.

'Yes, that is no doubt the reason,' said Jessie, reddening a little; 'the bond of sympathy between us is founded on our very poor opinion of our fellow-creatures.'

But after this Miss Bridgeman became more silent, and gave way much less than usual to those sudden impulses of sharp speech which Christabel had noticed.

They landed presently, and went wandering away into the inland—a strange world to Christabel, albeit very familiar to her lover.

'Not far from here there is a dell which is the most wonderful place in the world for bluebells,' said Angus, looking at his watch. 'I wonder whether we should have time to walk there.'

'Let us try, if it is not very, very far,' urged Christabel. 'I adore bluebells, and skylarks, and the cuckoo, and all the dear country flowers and birds. I have been surfeited with hot-house flowers and caged canaries since I came to London.'

A skylark was singing in the deep blue, far aloft, over the little wood in which they were wandering. It was the loneliest, loveliest spot; and Christabel felt as if it would be agony to leave it. She and her lover seemed ever so much nearer, dearer, more entirely united here than in London drawing-rooms, where she hardly dared to be civil to him lest society should be amused or contemptuous. Here she could cling to his arm—it seemed a strong and helpful arm now—and look up at his face with love irradiating her own countenance, and feel no more ashamed than Eve in the Garden. Here they could talk without fear of being heard; for Jessie and the Major followed at a most respectful distance—just keeping the lovers in view, and no more.

Christabel ran back presently to say they were going to look for bluebells.

'You'll come, won't you?' she pleaded; 'Angus says the dell is not far off.'

'I don't believe a bit in his topography,' said the Major; 'do you happen to know that it is three o'clock, and that you are due at a State dinner?'

'At eight,' cried Christabel, 'ages away. Angus says the train goes at six. We are to have some tea at Skindle's, at five. We have two hours in which to do what we like.'

'There is the row back to Skindle's.'

'Say half an hour for that, which gives us ninety minutes for the bluebells.'

'Do you count life by minutes, child?' asked the Major.

'Yes, Uncle Oliver, when I am utterly happy; for then every minute is precious.'

And then she and her lover went rambling on, talking, laughing, poetising under the flickering shadows and glancing lights; while the other two followed at a leisurely pace, like the dull foot of reality following the winged heel of romance. Jessie Bridgeman was only twenty-seven, yet in her own mind it seemed as if she were the Major's contemporary—nay, indeed, his senior: for he had never known that grinding poverty which ages the eldest daughter in a large shabby genteel family. Jessie Bridgeman had been old in care before she left off pinafores. Her childish pleasure in the shabbiest of dolls had been poisoned by a precocious familiarity with poor-rates and water-rates—a sickening dread of the shabby man in pepper-and-salt tweed, with the end of an oblong account-book protruding from his breast-pocket, who came to collect money that was never ready for him, and departed, leaving a printed notice, like the trail of the serpent, behind him. The first twenty years of Jessie Bridgeman's life had been steeped in poverty, every day, every hour flavoured with the bitter taste of deprivation and the world's contempt, the want of common comforts, the natural longing for fairer surroundings, the ever-present dread of a still lower deep in which pinching should become starvation, and even the shabby home should be no longer tenable. With a father whose mission upon this earth was to docket and file a certain class of accounts in Somerset House, for a salary of a hundred-and-eighty pounds a year, and a bi-annual rise of five, a harmless man, whose only crime was to have married young and made himself responsible for an unanticipated family—'How could a young fellow of two-and-twenty know that God was going to afflict him with ten children?' Mr. Bridgeman used to observe plaintively—with a mother whose life was one long domestic drudgery, who spent more of her days in a back kitchen than is consistent with the maintenance of personal dignity, and whose only chance of an airing was that stern necessity which impelled her to go and interview the tax-gatherer, in the hope of obtaining 'time'—Jessie's opportunities of tasting the pleasures of youth had been of the rarest. Once in six months or so, perhaps, a shabby-genteel friend gave her father an order for some theatre, which was in that palpable stage of ruin when orders are freely given to the tavern loafer and the stage-door hanger-on—and then, oh, what rapture to trudge from Shepherd's Bush to the West End, and to spend a long hot evening in the gassy paradise of the Upper Boxes! Once in a year or so Mr. Bridgeman gave his wife and eldest girl a dinner at an Italian Restaurant near Leicester Square—a cheap little pinchy dinner, in which the meagre modicum of meat and poultry was eked out by much sauce, redolent of garlic, by delicious foreign bread, and too-odorous foreign cheese. It was a tradition in the family that Mr. Bridgeman had been a great dinner-giver in his bachelor days, and knew every restaurant in London.

'They don't forget me here, you see,' he said, when the sleek Italian waiter brought him extra knives and forks for the dual portion which was to serve for three.

Such had been the utmost limit of Jessie's pleasures before she answered an advertisement in the *Times*, which stated that a lady, living in a retired part of Cornwall, required the services of a young lady who could write a good hand, keep accounts, and had some knowledge of housekeeping—who was willing, active, cheerful, and good-tempered. Salary, thirty pounds per annum.

It was not the first advertisement by many that Jessie had answered. Indeed, she seemed, to her own mind, to have been doing nothing but answering advertisements, and hoping against hope for a favourable reply, since her eighteenth birthday, when it had been borne in upon her, as the Evangelicals say, that she ought to go out into the world, and do something for her living, making one mouth less to be filled from the family bread-pan.

'There's no use talking, mother,' she said, when Mrs. Bridgeman tried to prove that the bright useful eldest daughter cost nothing; 'I eat, and food costs money. I have a dreadfully healthy appetite, and if I could get a decent situation I should cost you nothing, and should be able to send you half my salary. And now that Milly is getting a big girl——'

'She hasn't an idea of making herself useful,' sighed the mother; 'only yesterday she let the milkman ring three times and then march away without leaving us a drop of milk, because she was too proud or to lazy to open the door, while Sarah and I were up to our eyes in the wash.'

'Perhaps she didn't hear him,' suggested Jessie, charitably.

'She must have heard his pails if she didn't hear *him*,' said Mrs. Bridgeman; 'besides he "yooped," for I heard him, and relied upon that idle child for taking in the milk. But put not your trust in princes.' concluded the overworked matron, rather vaguely.

'Salary, thirty pounds per annum,' repeated Jessie, reading the Cornish lady's advertisement over and over again, as if it had been a charm; 'why that would be a perfect fortune! think what you could do with an extra fifteen pounds a year!'

'My dear, it would make my life heaven. But you would want all the money for your dress: you would have to be always nice. There would be dinner parties, no doubt, and you would be asked to come into the drawing-room of an evening,' said Mrs. Bridgeman, whose ideas of the governess's social status were derived solely from 'Jane Eyre.'

Jessie's reply to the advertisement was straightforward and succinct, and she wrote a fine bold hand. These two facts favourably impressed Mrs. Tregonell, and of the three or four dozen answers which her advertisement brought forth, Jessie's pleased her the most. The young lady's references to her father's landlord and the incumbent of the nearest church, were satisfactory. So one bleak wintry morning Miss Bridgeman left

Paddington in one of the Great Western's almost luxurious third-class carriages, and travelled straight to Launceston, whence a carriage—the very first private carriage she had ever sat in, and every detail of which was a wonder and a delight to her—conveyed her to Mount Royal.

That fine old Tudor manor-house, after the shabby ten-roomed villa at Shepherd's Bush—badly built, badly drained, badly situated, badly furnished, always smelling of yesterday's dinner, always damp and oozy with yesterday's rain—was almost too beautiful to be real. For days after her arrival Jessie felt as if she must be walking about in a dream. The elegancies and luxuries of life were all new to her. The perfect quiet and order of this country home ; the beauty in every detail—from the old silver urn and Worcester china which greeted her eyes on the breakfast-table, to the quaint little Queen Anne candlestick which she carried up to her bedroom at night—seemed like a revelation of a hitherto unknown world. The face of Nature—the hills and the moors—the sea and the cliffs—was as new to her as all that indoor luxury. An occasional week at Ramsgate or Southend had been all her previous experience of this world's loveliness. Happily, she was not a shy or awkward young person. She accommodated herself with wonderful ease to her altered surroundings—was not tempted to drink out of a finger-glass, and did not waver for a moment as to the proper use of her fish-knife and fork—took no wine—and ate moderately of that luxurious and plentiful fare which was as new and wonderful to her as if she had been transported from the barren larder of Shepherd's Bush to that fabulous land where the roasted piglings ran about with knives and forks in their backs, squeaking, in pig language, 'Come, eat me ; come eat me.'

Often in this paradise of pasties and clotted cream, mountain mutton and barn-door fowls, she thought with a bitter pang of the hungry circle at home, with whom dinner was the exception rather than the rule, and who made believe to think tea and bloaters an ever so much cosier meal than a formal repast of roast and boiled.

On the very day she drew her first quarter's salary—not for worlds would she have anticipated it by an hour—Jessie ran off to a farm she knew of, and ordered a monster hamper to be sent to Rosslyn Villa, Shepherd's Bush—a hamper full of chickens, and goose, and cream, and butter, with a big saffron-flavoured cake for its crowning glory—such a cake as would delight the younger members of the household !

Nor did she forget her promise to send the over-tasked house-mother half her earnings. 'You needn't mind taking the money, dearest,' she wrote in the letter which enclosed the Post-Office order. 'Mrs. Tregonell has given me a lovely grey silk gown; and I have bought a brown merino at Launceston, and a new hat and jacket. You would stare to see how splendidly your homely little Jessie is dressed! Christabel found out the date of my birthday, and gave me a dozen of the loveliest gloves, my favourite grey, with four buttons. A whole dozen! Did you ever see a dozen of gloves all at once, mother? You have no idea how lovely they look. I quite shrink from breaking into the packet; but I must wear a pair at church next Sunday, in compliment to the dear little giver. If it were not for thoughts of you and the brood, dearest, I should be intensely happy here! The house is an ideal house—the people are ideal people; and they treat me ever so much better than I deserve. I think I have the knack of being useful to them, which is a great comfort; and I am able to get on with the servants—old servants who had a great deal too much of their own way before I came—which is also a comfort. It is not easy to introduce reform without making oneself detested. Christabel, who has been steeping herself in French history lately, calls me Turgot in petticoats—by which you will see she has a high opinion of my ministerial talents—if you can remember Turgot, poor dear! amidst all your worries,' added Jessie, bethinking herself that her mother's book-learning had gone to seed in an atmosphere of petty domestic cares—mending—washing—pinching—contriving.

This and much more had Jessie Bridgeman written seven years ago, while Mount Royal was still new to her. The place and the people—at least those two whom she first knew there—had grown dearer as time went on. When Leonard came home from the University, he and his mother's factotum did not get on quite so well as Mrs. Tregonell had hoped. Jessie was ready to be kind and obliging to the heir of the house; but Leonard did not like her—in the language of the servants' hall, he 'put his back up at her.' He looked upon her as an interloper and a spy, especially suspecting her in the latter capacity, perhaps from a lurking consciousness that some of his actions would not bear the fierce light of unfriendly observation. In vain did his mother plead for her favourite.

'You have no idea how good she is!' said Mrs. Tregonell.

'You're perfectly right there, mother; I have not,' retorted Leonard.

'And so useful to me! I should be lost without her!'

'Of course; that's exactly what she wants: creeping and crawling—and pinching and saving—docking your tradesmen's accounts—grinding your servants—fingering your income—till, by-and-by, she will contrive to finger a good deal of it into her own pocket! That's the way they all begin—that's the way the man in the play, Sir Giles Overreach's man, began, you may be sure—till by-and-by he got Sir Giles under his thumb. And that's the way Miss Bridgeman will serve you. I wonder you are so short-sighted.'

Weak as Mrs. Tregonell was in her love for her son, she was too staunch to be set against a person she liked by any such assertions as these. She was quite able to form her own opinion about Miss Bridgeman's character, and she found the girl straight as an arrow—candid almost to insolence, yet pleasant withal; industrious, clever—sharp as a needle in all domestic details—able to manage pounds as carefully as she had managed pence and sixpences.

'Mother used to give me the housekeeping purse,' she said, 'and I did what I liked. I was always Chancellor of the Exchequer. It was a very small exchequer; but I learnt the habit of spending and managing, and keeping accounts.'

While active and busy about domestic affairs, verifying accounts, settling supplies and expenditures with the cook-housekeeper, making herself a veritable clerk of the kitchen, and overlooking the housemaids in the finer details of their work, Miss Bridgeman still found ample leisure for the improvement of her mind. In a quiet country house, where family prayers are read at eight o'clock every morning, the days are long enough for all things. Jessie had no active share in Christabel's education, which was Mrs. Tregonell's delight and care; but she contrived to learn what Christabel learnt—tc study with her and read with her, and often to outrun her in the pursuit of a favourite subject. They learnt German together, they read good French books together, and were companions in the best sense of the word. It was a happy life—monotonous, uneventful, but a placid, busy, all-satisfying life, which Jessie Bridgeman led during those six years and a half which went before the advent of Angus Hamleigh at Mount Royal. The companion's salary had long ago been doubled, and Jessie, who had no caprices, and whose wants were modest, was able to send forty pounds a year to Shepherd's Bush, and found a rich reward in the increased cheerfulness of the letters from home.

Just so much for Jessie Bridgeman's history as she walks by Major Bree's side in the sunlight, with a sharply cut face, impressed with a gravity beyond her years, and marked with precocious lines that were drawn there by the iron hand of poverty before she had emerged from girlhood. Of late, even amidst the elegant luxuries of May Fair, in a life given over to amusement, among flowers and bright scenery, and music and pictures, those lines had been growing deeper—lines that hinted at a secret care.

'Isn't it delightful to see them together!' said the Major, looking after those happy lovers with a benevolent smile.

'Yes; I suppose it is very beautiful to see such perfect happiness, like Juan and Haidée before Lambro swooped down upon them,' returned Miss Bridgeman, who was too outspoken to be ashamed of having read Byron's epic.

Major Bree had old-fashioned notions about the books women should and should not read, and Byron, except for elegant extracts, was in his *Index expurgatorius.* If a woman was allowed to read the 'Giaour,' she would inevitably read 'Don Juan,' he argued; there would be no restraining her, after she had tasted blood—no use in offering her another poet, and saying, Now you can read 'Thalaba,' or 'Peter Bell.'

'They were so happy!' said Jessie, dreamily, "so young, and one so innocent; and then came fear, severance, despair, and death for the innocent sinner. It is a terrible story!'

'Fortunately, there is no tyrannical father in this case,' replied the cheerful Major. 'Everybody is pleased with the engagement—everything smiles upon the lovers.'

'No, it is all sunshine,' said Jessie; 'there is no shadow, if Mr. Hamleigh is as worthy of her as we all think him. Yet there was a time when you spoke rather disparagingly of him.'

'My gossiping old tongue shall be cut out for repeating club scandals! Hamleigh is a generous-hearted, noble-natured fellow, and I am not afraid to trust him with the fate of a girl whom I love almost as well as if she were my own daughter. I don't know whether all men love their daughters, by the bye. There are daughters and daughters—I have seen some that it would be tough work to love. But for Christabel my affection is really parental. I have seen her bud and blossom, a beautiful living flower, a rose in the garden of life.'

'And you think Mr. Hamleigh is worthy of her?' said Miss Bridgeman, looking at him searchingly with her shrewd grey eyes, 'in spite of what you heard at the clubs?'

'A *fico* for what I heard at the clubs!' exclaimed the Major, blowing the slander away from the tips of his fingers as if it had been thistledown. 'Every man has a past, and every man outlives it. The present and the future are what we have to consider. It is not a man's history, but the man himself, that concerns us; and I say that Angus Hamleigh is a good man, a right-meaning man. a brave and generous man. If a man is to be judged by his history, where would David be, I should like to know? and yet David was the chosen of the Lord!' added the Major, conclusively.

'I hope,' said Jessie, earnestly, with vague visions of intrigue and murder conjured up in her mind, 'that Mr. Hamleigh was never as bad as David.'

'No, no,' murmured the Major, 'the circumstances of modern times are so different, don't you see?—an advanced civilization—a greater respect for human life. Napoleon the First did a good many queer things; but you would not get a monarch and a commander-in-chief to act as David and Joab acted now-a-days. Public opinion would be too strong for them. They would be afraid of the newspapers.'

'Was it anything very dreadful that you heard at the clubs three years ago?' asked Jessie, still hovering about a forbidden theme, with a morbid curiosity strange in one whose acts and thoughts were for the most part ruled by common sense.

The Major, who would not allow a woman to read 'Don Juan,' had his own ideas of what ought and ought not to be told to a woman.

'My dear Miss Bridgeman,' he said, 'I would not for worlds pollute your ears with the ribald trash men talk in a club smoking-room. Let it suffice for you to know that I believe in Angus Hamleigh, although I have taken the trouble to make myself acquainted with the follies of his youth.'

They walked on in silence for a little while after this, and then the Major said, in a voice full of kindness:

'I think you went to see your own people yesterday, did you not?'

'Yes; Mrs. Tregonell was kind enough to give me a morning, and I spent it with my mother and sisters.'

The Major had questioned her more than once about her home in a way which indicated so kindly an interest that it could not possibly be mistaken for idle curiosity. And she had told him, with perfect frankness, what manner of people her family were—in no wise hesitating to admit their narrow means, and the necessity that she should earn her own living.

'I hope you found them well and happy.'

'I thought my mother looked thin and weary. The girls were wonderfully well—great, hearty, overgrown creatures! I felt myself a wretched little shrimp among them. As for happiness—well, they are as happy as people can expect to be who are very poor!'

'Do you really think poverty is incompatible with happiness?' asked the Major, with a philosophical air; 'I have had a particularly happy life, and I have never been rich.'

'Ah, that makes all the difference!' exclaimed Jessie. 'You have never been rich, but they have always been poor. You can't conceive what a gulf lies between those two positions. You have been obliged to deny yourself a great many of the mere idle luxuries of life, I dare say—hunters, the latest improvements in guns, valuable dogs, continental travelling; but you have had enough for all the needful things—for neatness, cleanliness, an orderly household; a well-kept flower-garden, everything spotless and bright about you; no slipshod maid-of-all-work printing her greasy thumb upon your dishes—nothing out at elbows. Your house is small, but of its kind it is perfection; and your garden—well, if I had such a garden in such a situation I would not envy Eve the Eden she lost.'

'Is that really your opinion?' cried the enraptured soldier; 'or are you saying this just to please me—to reconcile me to my jog-trot life, my modest surroundings?'

'I mean every word I say.'

'Then it is in your power to make me richer in happiness than Rothschild or Baring. Dearest Miss Bridgeman, dearest Jessie, I think you must know how devotedly I love you! Till to-day I have not dared to speak, for my limited means would not have allowed me to maintain a wife as the woman I love ought to be maintained; but this morning's post brought me the news of the death of an old Admiral of the Blue, who was my father's first cousin. He was a bachelor like myself—left the Navy soon after the signing of Sir Henry Pottinger's treaty at Nankin in '42—never considered himself well enough off to marry, but lived in a lodging at Devonport, and hoarded and hoarded and hoarded for the mere abstract pleasure of accumulating his surplus income; and the result of his hoarding—combined with a little dodging of his investments in stocks and shares—is, that he leaves me a solid four hundred a year in Great Westerns. It is not much from some people's point of view, but, added to my existing income, it makes me very comfortable. I could afford to indulge all your simple wishes, my dearest! I could afford to help your family!'

He took her hand. She did not draw it away, but pressed his gently, with the grasp of friendship.

'Don't say one word more—you are too good—you are the best and kindest man I have ever known!' she said, 'and I shall love and honour you all my life; but I shall never marry! I made up my mind about that, oh! ever so long ago. Indeed, I never expected to be asked, if the truth must be told.'

'I understand,' said the Major terribly dashed. 'I am too old. Don't suppose that I have not thought about that. I have. But I fancied the difficulty might be got over. You are so different from the common run of girls—so staid, so sensible, of such a contented disposition. But I was a fool to suppose that any girl of———'

'Seven-and-twenty,' interrupted Jessie; 'it is a long way up the hill of girlhood. I shall soon be going down on the other side.'

'At any rate, you are more than twenty years my junior. I was a fool to forget that.'

'Dear Major Bree,' said Jessie, very earnestly, 'believe me, it is not for that reason, I say No. If you were as young—as young as Mr. Hamleigh—the answer would be just the same. I shall never marry. There is no one, prince or peasant, whom I care to marry. You are much too good a man to be married for the sake of a happy home, for status in the world, kindly companionship—all of which you could give me. If I loved you as you ought to be loved I would answer proudly, Yes; but I honour you too much to give you half love.'

'Perhaps you do not know with how little I could be satisfied,' urged the Major, opposing what he imagined to be a romantic scruple with the shrewd common-sense of his fifty years' experience. 'I want a friend, a companion, a helpmate, and I am sure you could be all those to me. If I could only make you happy!'

'You could not!' interrupted Jessie, with cruel decisiveness. 'Pray, never speak of this again, dear Major Bree. Your friendship has been very pleasant to me; it has been one of the many charms of my life at Mount Royal. I would not lose it for the world. And we can always be friends, if you will only remember that I have made up my mind—irrevocably—never to marry.'

'I must needs obey you,' said the Major, deeply disappointed but too unselfish to be angry. 'I will not be importunate. Yet, one word I must say. Your future—if you do not marry—what is that to be? Of course, so long as Mrs. Tregonell lives, your home will be at Mount Royal—but I fear that does not settle the question for long. My dear friend does not appear to me a long-lived woman. I have seen traces of premature decay. When Christabel is married, and Mrs. Tregonell is dead, where is your home to be?'

'Providence will find me one,' answered Jessie, cheerfully. Providence is wonderfully kind to plain little spinsters with a knack of making themselves useful. I have been doing my best to educate myself ever since I have been at Mount Royal. It is so easy to improve one's mind when there are no daily worries about the tax-gatherer and the milkman—and when I am called upon to seek a new home, I can go out as a governess—and drink the cup of life as it is mixed for governesses—as Charlotte Brontë says. Perhaps I shall write a novel, as she did, although I have not her genius.'

'I would not be sure of that,' said the Major. 'I believe there is some kind of internal fire burning you up, although you are outwardly so quiet, I think it would have been your salvation to accept the jog-trot life and peaceful home I have offered you.'

'Very likely,' replied Jessie, with a shrug and a sigh. 'But how many people reject salvation. They would rather be miserable in their own way than happy in anybody else's way.'

The Major answered never a word. For him all the glory of the day had faded. He walked slowly on by Jessie's side, meditating upon her words—wondering why she had so resolutely refused him. There had been not the least wavering—she had not even seemed to be taken by surprise—her mind had been made up long ago—not him, nor any other man, would she wed.

'Some early disappointment, perhaps,' mused the Major—'a curate at Shepherd's Bush—those young men have a great deal to answer for.'

They came to the hyacinth dell—an earthly paradise to the two happy lovers, who were sitting on a mossy bank, in a sheet of azure bloom, which, seen from the distance, athwart young trees, looked like blue, bright water.

To the Major the hazel copse and the bluebells—the young oak plantation—and all the lovely details of mosses and flowering grasses, and starry anemones—were odious. He felt in a hurry to get back to his club, and steep himself in London pleasures. All the benevolence seemed to have been crushed out of him.

Christabel saw that her old friend was out of spirits, and contrived to be by his side on their way back to the boat, trying to cheer him with sweetest words and loveliest smiles.

'Have we tired you?' she asked. 'The afternoon is very warm.'

'Tired me! You forget how I ramble over the hills at home. No; I am just a trifle put out—but it is nothing. I had news of a death this morning—a death that makes me richer by four hundred a year. If it were not for respect for my dead cousin who so kindly made me his heir, I think I should go to-night to the most rowdy theatre in London, just to put myself in spirits

'Which are the rowdy theatres, Uncle Oliver?'

'Well, perhaps I ought not to use such a word. The theatres are all good in their way—but there are theatres and theatres. I should choose one of those to which the young men go night after night to see the same piece—a burlesque, or an opera bouffe—plenty of smart jokes and pretty girls.'

'Why have you not taken me to those theatres?'

'We have not come to them yet. You have seen Shakespeare and modern comedy—which is rather a weak material as compared with Sheridan—or even with Colman and Morton, whose plays were our staple entertainment when I was a boy. You have heard all the opera singers?'

'Yes, you have been very good. But I want to see "Cupid and Psyche"—two of my partners last night talked to me of "Cupid and Psyche," and were astounded that I had not seen it. I felt quite ashamed of my ignorance. I asked one of my partners, who was particularly enthusiastic, to tell me all about the play—and he did—to the best of his ability, which was not great—and he said that a Miss Mayne—Stella Mayne—who plays Psyche, is simply adorable. She is the loveliest woman in London, he says—and was greatly surprised that she had not been pointed out to me in the Park. Now really, Uncle Oliver, this is very remiss in you—you who are so clever in showing me famous people when we are driving in the Park.'

'My dear, we have not happened to see her—that is all,' replied the Major, without any responsive smile at the bright young face smiling up at him.

'You have seen her, I suppose?'

'Yes, I saw her when I was last in London.'

'Not this time?'

'Not this time.'

'You most unenthusiastic person. But, I understand your motive. You have been waiting an opportunity to take Jessie and me to see this divine Psyche. Is she absolutely lovely?'

'Loveliness is a matter of opinion. She is generally accepted as a particularly pretty woman.'

'When will you take me to see her?'

'I have no idea. You have so many engagements—your aunt is always making new ones. I can do nothing without her permission. Surely you like dancing better than sitting in a theatre?'

'No, I do not. Dancing is delightful enough—but to be in a theatre is to be in fairy-land. It is like going into a new world. I leave myself, and my own life, at the doors—and go to live and love and suffer and be glad with the people in the play. To see a powerful play—really well acted—such acting as we have seen—is to live a new life from end to end in a few hours. It is like getting the essence of a lifetime without any of the actual pain—for when the situation is too terrible, one can pinch oneself and say—it is only a dream—an acted dream.'

'If you like powerful plays—plays that make you tremble and cry—you would not care twopence for "Cupid and Psyche,"' said Major Bree. 'It is something between a burlesque and a fairy comedy—a most frivolous kind of entertainment, I believe.'

'I don't care how frivolous it is. I have set my heart upon seeing it. I don't want to be out of the fashion. If you won't get me a box at the—where is it?'

'The Kaleidoscope Theatre.'

'At the Kaleidoscope! I shall ask Angus.'

'Please don't. I—I shall be seriously offended if you do. Let me arrange the business with your aunt. If you really want to see the piece, I suppose you must see it—but not unless your aunt likes.'

'Dear, dearest, kindest uncle Oliver!' cried Christabel, squeezing his arm. 'From my childhood upwards you have always fostered my self-will by the blindest indulgence. I was afraid that, all at once, you were going to be unkind and thwart me.'

Major Bree was thoughtful and silent for the rest of the afternoon, and although Jessie tried to be as sharp-spoken and vivacious as usual, the effort would have been obvious to any two people properly qualified to observe the actions and expressions of others. But Angus and Christabel, being completely absorbed in each other, saw nothing amiss in their companions.

The river and the landscape were divine—a river for gods—a wood for nymphs—altogether too lovely for mortals. Tea, served on a little round table in the hotel garden, was perfect.

'How much nicer than the dinner to-night!' exclaimed Christabel. 'I wish we were not going. And yet, it will be very pleasant, I daresay—a table decorated with the loveliest flowers—well-dressed women, clever men, all talking as if there was not a care in life—and perhaps we shall be next each other,' added the happy girl, looking at Angus.

'What a comfort for me that I am out of it,' said Jessie. 'How nice to be an insignificant young woman whom nobody ever dreams of asking to dinner. A powdered old dowager did actually hint at my going to her musical evening the other day when she called in Bolton Row. "Be sure you come early," she said gushingly, to Mrs. Tregonell and Christabel; and then, in quite another key, glancing at me, she added, and "if Miss—er—er would like to hear my singers, I should be—er—delighted," no doubt mentally adding, "I hope she won't have the impertinence to take me at my word."'

'Jessie, you are the most evil-thinking person I ever knew,' cried Christabel. 'I'm sure Lady Millamont meant to be civil.'

'Yes, but she did not mean me to go to her party,' retorted Jessie.

The happy days—the society evenings—slipped by—dining—music—dancing. And now came the brief bright season of rustic entertainments—more dancing—more music—lawn-tennis—archery—water parties—every device by which the summer hours may chime in tune with pleasure. It was July—Christabel's birthday had come and gone, bring a necklace of single diamonds and a basket of June roses from Angus, and the most perfect thing in Park hacks from Mrs. Tregonell—but Christabel's wedding-day—more fateful than any birthday except the first—had not yet been fixed—albeit Mr. Hamleigh pressed for a decision upon this vital point.

'It was to have been at Midsummer,' he said, one day, when he had been discussing the question *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Tregonell.

'Indeed, Angus, I never said that. I told you that Christabel would be twenty at Midsummer, and that I would not consent to the marriage until after then.'

'Precisely, but surely that meant soon after? I thought we should be married early in July—in time to start for the Tyrol in golden weather.'

'I never had any fixed date in my mind,' answered Mrs. Tregonell, with a pained look. Struggle with herself as she might, this engagement of Christabel's was a disappointment and a grief to her. 'I thought my son would have returned before now. I should not like the wedding to take place in his absence.'

'And I should like him to be at the wedding,' said Angus; 'but I think it will be rather hard if we have to wait for the caprice of a traveller who, from what Belle tells me of his letters——'

'Has Belle shown you any of his letters?' asked Mrs. Tregonell, with a vexed look.

'No, I don't think he has written to her, has he?'

'No, of course not; his letters are always addressed to me. He is a wretched correspondent.'

'I was going to say, that, from what Belle tells me, your son's movements appear most uncertain, and it really does not seem worth while to wait.'

'When the wedding-day is fixed, I will send him a message by the Atlantic cable. We must have him at the wedding.'

Mr. Hamleigh did not see the necessity; but he was too kind to say so. He pressed for a settlement as to the day—or week—or at least the month in which his marriage was to take place—and at last Mrs. Tregonell consented to the beginning of September. They were all agreed now that the fittest marriage temple for this particular bride and bridegroom was the little old church in the heart of the hills—the church in which Christabel had worshipped every Sunday, morning or afternoon, ever since she could remember. It was Christabel's own desire to kneel before that familiar altar on her wedding-day—in the solemn peacefulness of that loved hill-side, with friendly honest country faces round her—rather than in the midst of a fashionable crowd, attended by bridesmaids after Gainsborough, and page-boys after Vandyke, in an atmosphere heavy with the scent of Ess Bouquet.

Mr. Hamleigh had no near relations—and albeit a whole bevy of cousins and a herd of men from the clubs would have gladly attended to witness his excision from the ranks of gilded youth, and to bid him God-speed on his voyage to the domestic haven—their presence at the sacrifice would have given him no pleasure—while, on the other hand, there was one person resident in London whose presence would have caused him acute pain. Thus, each of the lovers pleading for the same favour, Mrs. Tregonell had forgone her idea of a London wedding, and had come to see that it would be very hard upon all the kindly inhabitants of Forrabury and Minster—Boscastle—Trevalga—Bossiney and Trevena—to deprive them of the pleasurable excitement to be derived from Christabel's wedding.

Early in September, in the golden light of that lovely time, they were to be quietly married in the dear old church, and then away to Tyrolean woods and hills—scenes which, for Christabel, seemed to be the chosen background of poetry, legend, and romance, rather than an actual country, provided with hotels, and accessible by tourists. Once having consented to the naming of an exact time, Mrs. Tregonell felt there could be no withdrawal of her word. She telegraphed to Leonard, who was somewhere in the Rocky Mountains, with a chosen friend, a couple of English servants and three or four Canadians,—and who, were he so minded, could be home in a month—and having despatched this message she felt the last wrench had been endured. Nothing that could ever come afterwards—save death itself—could give her sharper pain.

'Poor Leonard,' she replied ; 'it will break his heart.'

In the years that were gone she had so identified herself with her son's hopes and schemes, had so projected her thoughts into his future—seeing him in her waking dreams as he would be in the days to come, a model squire, possessed of all his father's old-fashioned virtues, with a great deal of modern cleverness superadded, a proud and happy husband, the father of a noble race—she had kept this vision of the future in her mind so long, had dwelt upon it so fondly, had coloured it so brightly, that to forego it now, to say to herself 'This thing was but a dream which I dreamed, and it can never be realized,' was like relinquishing a part of her own life. She was a deeply religious woman, and if called upon to bear physical pain—to suffer the agonies of a slow, incurable illness—she would have suffered with the patience of a Christian martyr, saying to herself, as brave Dr. Arnold said in the agony of his sudden fatal malady, 'Whom He loveth He chasteneth,'—but she could not surrender the day-dream of her life without bitterest repining. In all her love of Christabel, in all her careful education and moral training of the niece to whom she had been as a mother, there had been this leven of selfishness. She had been rearing a wife for her son—such a wife as would be a man's better angel—a guiding, restraining, elevating principle, so interwoven with his life that he should never know himself in leading-strings—an influence so gently exercised that he should never suspect that he was influenced.

'Leonard has a noble heart and a fine manly character,' the mother had often told herself ; 'but he wants the association of a milder nature than his own. He is just the kind of man to be guided and governed by a good wife!—a wife who would obey his lightest wish, and yet rule him always for good.'

She had seen how, when Leonard had been disposed to act unkindly or illiberally by a tenant, Christabel had been able to persuade him to kindness or generosity—how, when he had set his face against going to church, being minded to devote Sunday morning to the agreeable duty of cleaning a favourite gun, or physicking a favourite spaniel, or greasing a cherished pair of fishing-boots, Christabel had taken him there—how she had softened and toned down his small social discourtesies, checked his tendency to strong language—and, as it were, expurgated, edited, and amended him.

And having seen and rejoiced in this state of things, it was very hard to be told that another had won the wife she had moulded, after her own fashion, to be the gladness and glory of her son's life ; all the harder because it was her own short-sighted folly which had brought Angus Hamleigh to Mount Royal.

All through that gay London season—for Christabel a time of unclouded gladness—carking care had been at Mrs. Tregonell's heart. She tried to be just to the niece whom she dearly loved, and who had so tenderly and fully repaid her affection. Yet she could not help feeling as if Christabel's choice was a personal injury—nay, almost treachery and ingratitude. 'She must have known that I meant her to be my son's wife,' she said to herself ; 'yet she takes advantage of my poor boy's absence, and gives herself to the first comer.'

'Surely September is soon enough,' she said, pettishly, when Angus pleaded for an earlier date. 'You will not have known Christabel for a year, even then. Some men love a girl for half a life-time before they win her.'

'But it was not my privilege to know Christabel at the beginning of my life,' replied Angus. 'I made the most of my opportunities by loving her the moment I saw her.'

'It is impossible to be angry with you,' sighed Mrs. Tregonell. 'You are so like your father.'

That was one of the worst hardships of the case. Mrs. Tregonell could not help liking the man who had thwarted the dearest desire of her heart. She could not help admiring him, and making comparisons between him and Leonard—not to the advantage of her son. Had not her first love been given to his father—the girl's romantic love, ever so much more fervid and intense than any later passion—the love that sees ideal perfection in a lover?

CHAPTER VII.

CUPID AND PSYCHE.

In all the bright June weather, Christabel had been too busy and too happy to remember her caprice about Cupid and Psyche. But just after the Henley week—which to some thousands, and to these two lovers, had been as a dream of bliss—a magical mixture of sunlight and balmy airs and flowery meads, fine gowns and fine luncheons, nigger singers, stone-breaking athletes, gipsy sorceresses, eager to read high fortunes on any hand for half-a-crown, rowing men, racing men, artists, actors, poets, critics, swells—just after the wild excitement of that watery saturnalia, Mr. Hamleigh had occasion to go to the North of Scotland to see an ancient kinswoman of his father—an eccentric maiden aunt—who had stood for him, by proxy, at the baptismal font, and at the same time announced her intention of leaving him her comfortable fortune, together with all those snuff-mulls, quaighs, knives and forks, spoons, and other curiosities of Caledonia, which had been in the family for centuries—provided always that he grew up with a high opinion of Mary Stuart, and religiously believed the casket letters to be the vile forgeries of George Buchanan. The old lady, who was a kindly soul, with a broad Scotch tongue, had an inconvenient habit of sending for her nephew at odd times and seasons, when she imagined herself on the point of death—and he was too kind to turn a deaf ear to this oft-repeated cry of 'wolf'—lest, after making light of her summons, he should hear that the real wolf had come and devoured the harmless, affectionate old lady.

So now, just when London life was at its gayest and brightest, when the moonlit city after midnight looked like fairy-land, and the Thames Embankment, with its long chain of glittering lamps, gleaming golden above the sapphire river, was a scene to dream about, Mr. Hamleigh had to order his portmanteau and a hansom, and drive from the Albany to one of the great railway stations in the Euston Road, and to curl himsef up in his corner of the limited mail, scarcely to budge till he was landed at Inverness. It was hard to leave Christabel, though it were only for a week. He swore to her that his absence should not outlast a week, unless the grisly wolf called Death did indeed claim his victim.

'I know I shall find the dear old soul up and hearty,' he said, lightly, 'devouring Scotch collops, or haggis, or cock-a-leeky, or something equally loathsome, and offering me some of that extraordinary soup which she always talks of in the plural. "Do have a few more broth, Angus; they're very good the day." But she is a sweet old woman, despite her barbarities, and one of the happiest days of my life will be that on which I take you to see her.'

'And if—if she is not very ill, you will come back soon, won't you, Angus,' pleaded Christabel.

'As soon as ever I can tear myself away from the collops and the few broth. If I find the dear old impostor in rude health, as I quite expect, I will hob and nob with her over one glass of toddy, sleep one night under her roof, and then across the Border as fast as the express will carry me.'

So they parted; and Angus had scarcely left Bolton Row an hour, when Major Bree came in, and, by some random flight of fancy, Christabel remembered 'Cupid and Psyche.'

The three ladies had just come upstairs after dinner. Mrs. Tregonell was enjoying forty winks in a low capacious chair, near an open window, in the first drawing-room, softly lit by shaded Carcel lamps, scented with tea-roses and stephanotis. Christabel and Jessie were in the tiny third room, where there was only the faint light of a pair of wax candles on the mantelpiece. Here the Major found them, when he came creeping in from the front room, where he had refrained from disturbing Mrs. Tregonell.

'Auntie is asleep,' said Christabel. 'We must talk in subdued murmurs. She looked sadly tired after Mrs. Dulcimer's garden party.'

I ought not to have come so early,' apologized the Major.

'Yes you ought; we are very glad to have you. It is dreadfully dull without Angus.'

'What! you begin to miss him already?'

'Already!' echoed Christabel. 'I missed him before the sound of his cab wheels was out of the street. I have been missing him ever since.'

'Poor little Belle!'

'And he is not half-way to Scotland yet,' she sighed. 'How long and slow the hours will be! You must do all you can to amuse me. I shall want distractions—dissipation even. If we were at home I should go and wander up by Willapark, and talk to the gulls. Here there is nothing to do. Another stupid garden party at Twickenham to-morrow, exactly opposite the one to-day at Richmond—the only variety being that we shall be on the north bank of the river instead of the south bank—a prosy dinner in Regent's Park the day after. Let me see,' said Christabel, suddenly animated. 'We are quite free for to-morrow evening. We can go and see 'Cupid and Psyche,' and I can tell Angus all about it when he comes back. Please get us a nice see-able box, like a dear obliging Uncle Oliver, as you are!'

'Of course I am obliging,' groaned tho Major, 'but the most obliging person that ever was can't perform impossibilities. If you want a box at the Kaleidoscope you must engage one for to-morrow month—or to-morrow six weeks. It is a mere bandbox of a theatre, and everybody in London wants to see this farrago of nonsense illustrated by pretty women.'

'You have seen it, I suppose?'

'Yes, I dropped in one night with an old naval friend who had taken a stall for his wife, which she was not able to occupy.'

'Major Bree, you are a very selfish person,' said Christabel, straightening her slim waist, and drawing herself up with mock dignity. 'You have seen this play yourself, and you are artful enough to tell us it is not worth seeing, just to save yourself the trouble of hunting for a box. Uncle Oliver, that is not chivalry. I used to think you were a chivalrous person.'

'Is there anything improper in the play?' asked Jessie, striking in with her usual bluntness—never afraid to put her thoughts into speech. 'Is that your reason for not wishing Christabel to see it?'

'No, the piece is perfectly correct,' stammered the Major, 'there is not a word——'

'Then I think Belle's whim ought to be indulged,' said Jessie, 'especially as Mr. Hamleigh's absence makes her feel out of spirits.'

The Major murmured something vague about the difficulty of getting places with less than six weeks' notice, whereupon Christabel told him, with a dignified air, that he need not trouble himself any further.

But a young lady who has plenty of money, and who has been accustomed, while dutiful and obedient to her elders, to have her own way in all essentials, is not so easily satisfied as the guileless Major supposed. As soon as the West-end shops were open next morning, before the jewellers had set out their dazzling wares—those diamond parures and rivières, which are always inviting the casual lounger to step in and buy them—those goodly chased claret jugs, and Queen Anne tea-kettles, and mighty venison dishes, which seemed to say, this is an age of luxury, and we are indispensable to a gentleman's table—before those still more attractive shops which deal in hundred-guinea dressing-cases, jasper inkstands, ormolu paper-weights, lapis lazuli blotting-books, and coral powder-boxes—had laid themselves out for the tempter's work—Miss Courtenay and Miss Bridgman, in their neat morning attire, were tripping from library to library, in quest of a box at the Kaleidoscope for that very evening.

They found what they wanted in Bond Street. Lady Somebody had sent back her box by a footman, just ten minutes ago, on account of Lord Somebody's attack of gout. The librarian could have sold it were it fifty boxes, and at a fabulous price, but he virtuously accepted four guineas, which gave him a premium of only one guinea for his trouble—and Christabel went home rejoicing.

'It will be such fun to show the Major that we are cleverer than he,' she said to Jessie.

Miss Bridgeman was thoughtful, and made no reply to this remark. She was pondering the Major's conduct in this small matter, and it seemed to her that he must have some hidden reason for wishing Christabel not to see 'Cupid and Psyche.' That he, who had so faithfully waited upon all their fancies, taking infinite trouble to give them pleasure, could in this matter be disobliging or indifferent seemed hardly possible. There must be a reason; and yet what reason could there be to taboo a piece which the Major distinctly declared to be correct, and which all the fashionable world went to see? 'Perhaps there is something wrong with the drainage of the theatre,' Jessie thought, speculating vaguely—a suspicion of typhoid fever, which the Major had shrunk from mentioning, out of respect for feminine nerves.

'Did you ever tell Mr. Hamleigh you wanted to see 'Cupid and Psyche'?' asked Miss Bridgeman at last, sorely exercised in spirit—fearful lest Christabel was incurring some kind of peril by her persistence.

'Yes, I told him; but it was at a time when we had a good many engagements, and I think he forgot all about it. Hardly like Angus, was it, to forget one's wishes, when he is generally so eager to anticipate them?'

'A strange coincidence!' thought Jessie. Mr. Hamleigh and the Major had been unanimous in their neglect of this particular fancy of Christabel's.

At luncheon Miss Courtenay told her aunt the whole story—how Major Bree had been most disobliging, and how she had circumvented him.

'And my revenge will be to make him sit out 'Cupid and Psyche' for the second time,' she said, lightly, 'for he must be our escort. You will go, of course, dearest, to please me?'

'My pet, you know how the heat of a theatre always exhausts me!' pleaded Mrs. Tregonell, whose health, long delicate, had been considerably damaged by her duties as chaperon. 'When you are going anywhere with Angus, I like to be seen with you; but to-night, with the Major and Jessie, I shall not be wanted. I can enjoy an evening's rest.'

'But do you enjoy that long, blank evening, Auntie?' asked Christabel, looking anxiously at her aunt's somewhat careworn face. People who have one solitary care make so much of it, nurse and fondle it, as if it were an only child. 'Once or twice when we have let you have your own way and stay at home you have looked so pale and melancholy when we came back, as if you had been brooding upon sad thoughts all the evening.'

'Sad thoughts will come, Belle.'

'They ought not to come to you, Auntie. What cause have you for sadness?'

'I have a dear son far away, Belle—don't you think that is cause enough?'

'A son who enjoys the wild sports of the West ever so much better than he enjoys his home; but who will settle down by-and-by into a model country Squire.'

'I doubt that, Christabel. I don't think he will ever settle down—now.'

There was an emphasis—an almost angry emphasis—upon the last word which told Christabel only too plainly what her aunt meant. She could guess what disappointment it was that her aunt sighed over in the long, lonely evenings; and, albeit the latent resentfulness in Mrs. Tregonell's mind was an injustice, her niece could not help being sorry for her.

'Yes, dearest, he will—he will,' she said, resolutely. 'He will have his fill of shooting bisons, and all manner of big and small game, out yonder; and he will come home, and marry some good sweet girl, who will love you only just a little less than I do, and he will be the last grand example of the old-fashioned country Squire—a race fast dying out; and he will be as much respected as if the power of the Norman Botterels still ruled in the land, and he had the right of dealing out high-handed justice, and immuring his fellow-creatures in a dungeon under his drawing-room.'

'I would rather you would not talk about him,' answered the widow, gloomily; 'you turn everything into a joke. You forget that in my uncertainty about his fate, every thought of him is fraught with pain.'

Belle hung her head, and the meal ended in silence. After luncheon came dressing, and then the drive to Twickenham, with Major Bree in attendance. Christabel told him of her success as they drove through the Park to Kensington.

'I have the pleasure to invite you to a seat in my box at the Kaleidoscope this evening,' she said.

'What box?'

'A box which Jessie and I secured this morning, before you had finished your breakfast.'

'A box for this evening?'

'For this evening.'

'I wonder you care to go to a theatre without Hamleigh.'

'It is very cruel of you to say that!' exclaimed Christabel, her eyes brightening with girlish tears, which her pride checked before they could fall. 'You ought to know that I am wretched without him—and that I want to lose the sense of my misery in dreamland. The theatre for me is what opium was for Coleridge and De Quincey.'

'I understand,' said Major Bree; '"you are not merry, but you do beguile the thing you are by seeming otherwise."'

'You will go with us?'

'Of course, if Mrs. Tregonell does not object.'

'I shall be very grateful to you for taking care of them,' answered the dowager languidly, as she leant back in her carriage —a fine example of handsome middle-age; gracious, elegant, bearing every mark of good birth, yet with a worn look, as of one for whom fading beauty and decline of strength would come too swiftly. I know I shall be tired to death when we get back to town.'

'I don't think London Society suits you so well as the monotony of Mount Royal,' said Major Bree.

'No; but I am glad Christabel has had her first season. People have been extremely kind. I never thought we should have so many invitations.'

'You did not know that beauty is the ace of trumps in the game of society.'

The garden party was as other parties of the same genus: strawberry ices and iced coffee in a tent under a spreading Spanish chestnut—music and recitations in a drawing-room, with many windows looking upon the bright swift river—and the picturesque roofs of Old Richmond—just that one little picturesque group of bridge and old tiled-gables which still remains—fine gowns, fine talk; a dash of the æsthetic element; strange colours, strange forms and fashions; pretty girls in grandmother bonnets; elderly women in limp Ophelia gowns, with tumbled frills and lank hair. Christabel and the Major walked about the pretty garden, and criticized all the eccentricities, she glad to keep aloof from her many admirers—safe under the wing of a familiar friend.

'Five o'clock,' she said; 'that makes twenty-four hours. Do you think he will be back to-morrow?'

'He? Might I ask whom you mean by that pronoun?'

'Angus. His telegram this morning said that his aunt was really ill—not in any danger—but still quite an invalid, and that he would be obliged to stay a little longer than he had hoped might be needful, in order to cheer her. Do you think he will be able to come back to-morrow?'

'Hardly, I fear. Twenty-four hours would be a very short time for the cheering process. I think you ought to allow him a week. Did you answer his telegram?'

'Why, of course! I told him how miserable I was without him; but that he must do whatever was right and kind for his aunt. I wrote him a long letter before luncheon to the same effect. But, oh, I hope the dear old lady will get well very quickly!'

'If usquebaugh can mend her, no doubt the recovery will be rapid, answered the Major, laughing. 'I daresay that is why you are so anxious for Hamleigh's return. You think if he stays in the North he may become a confirmed toddy-drinker. By the bye, when his return is so uncertain, do you think it is quite safe for you to go to the theatre to-night? He might come to Bolton Row during your absence.'

'That is hardly possible,' said Christabel. 'But even if such a happy thing should occur, he would come and join us at the Kaleidoscope.'

This was the Major's last feeble and futile effort to prevent a wilful woman having her own way. They rejoined Mrs. Tregonell, and went back to their carriage almost immediately—were in Bolton Row in time for a seven o'clock dinner, and were seated in the box at the Kaleidoscope a few minutes after eight. The Kaleidoscope was one of the new theatres which have been added to the attractions of London during the last twenty years. It was a small house, and of exceeding elegance; the inspiration of the architect thereof seemingly derived rather from the *bonbonnières* of Siraudin and Boissier than from the severer exemplars of high art Somebody said it was a theatre which looked as if it ought to be filled with glacé chestnuts, or crystallized violets, rather than with substantial flesh and blood. The draperies thereof were of palest dove-coloured poplin and cream-white satin, the fauteuils were upholstered in velvet of the same dove colour, with a monogram in dead gold; the pilasters and mouldings were of the slenderest and most delicate order—no heavy masses of gold or colour—all airy, light, graceful; the sweeping curve of the auditorium was in itself a thing of beauty; every fold of the voluminous dove-coloured curtain, lined with crimson satin—which flashed among the dove tints here and there, like a gleam of vivid colour in the breast of a tropical bird—was a study. The front of the house was lighted with old-fashioned wax candles, a recurrence to obsolete fashion which reminded the few survivors of the D'Orsay period of Her Majesty's in the splendid days of Pasta and Malibran, and which delighted the Court and Livery of the Tallow Chandlers' Company.

'What a lovely theatre!' cried Christabel, looking round the house, which was crowded with a brilliant audience; 'and how cruel of you not to bring us here! It is the prettiest theatre we have seen yet.'

'Yes; it's a nice little place,' said the Major, feebly; 'but, you see, they've been playing the same piece all the season—no variety.'

'What did that matter, when we had not seen the piece? Besides, a young man I danced with told me he had been to see it fifteen times.'

'That young man was an ass!' grumbled the Major.

'Well, I can't help thinking so too,' assented Christabel. And then the overture began—a dreamy, classical compound, made up of reminiscences of Mozart, Beethoven, and Weber—a melodious patchwork, dignified by scientific orchestration. Christabel listened dreamily to the dreamy music, thinking of Angus all the while—wondering what he was doing in the far-away Scottish land, which she knew only from Sir Walter's novels.

The dove-coloured curtains were drawn apart to a strain of plaintive sweetness, and the play—half poem, half satire—began. The scene was a palace garden, in some 'unsuspected isle in far-off seas.' The personages were Psyche, her sisters, and the jealous goddess, whose rest had been disturbed by rumours of an earthly beauty which surpassed her own divine charms, and who approached the palace disguised as a crone, dealing in philters and simples, ribbons and perfumes, a kind of female Autolycus.

First came a dialogue between Venus and the elder sisters—handsome women both, but of a coarse type of beauty, looking too large for the frame in which they appeared. Christabel and Jessie enjoyed the smartness of the dialogue, which sparkled with Aristophanian hits at the follies of the hour, and yet had a poetical grace which seemed the very flavour of the old Greek world.

At last, after the interest of the fable had fairly begun, there rose the faint melodious breathings of a strange music within the palace—the quaint and primitive harmonies of a three-stringed lyre—and Psyche came slowly down the marble steps, a slender, gracious figure in classic drapery—Canova's statue incarnate.

'Very pretty face,' muttered the Major. looking at her through his opera-glass; 'but no figure.'

The slim, willowy form, delicately and lightly moulded as a young fawn's, was assuredly of a type widely different from the two young women of the fleshly school who represented Psyche's jealous sisters. In their case there seemed just enough mind to keep those sleek, well-favoured bodies in motion. In Stella Mayne the soul, or, at any rate, an ethereal essence, a vivid beauty of expression, an electric brightness, which passes for the soul, so predominated over the sensual, that it would have scarcely surprised one if this fragile butterfly-creature had verily spread a pair of filmy wings and floated away into space. The dark liquid eyes, the small chiselled features, exquisitely Greek, were in most perfect harmony with the character. Amongst the substantial sensuous forms of her companions this Psyche moved like a being from the spirit world.

'Oh!' cried Christabel, almost with a gasp, 'how perfectly lovely!'

'Yes; she's very pretty, isn't she?' muttered the Major, tugging at his grey moustache, and glaring at the unconscious Psyche from his lurking place at the back of the box.

'Pretty is not the word. She is the realization of a poem.'

Jessie Bridgeman said nothing. She had looked straight from Psyche to the Major, as he grunted out his acquiescence, and the troubled expression of his face troubled her. It was plain to her all in a moment that his objection to the Kaleidoscope Theatre was really an objection to Psyche. Yet what harm could that lovely being on the stage, even were she the worst and vilest of her sex, do to any one so remote from her orbit as Christabel Courtenay?

The play went on. Psyche snoke her graceful lines with a perfect intonation. Nature had in this case not been guilty of cruel inconsistency. The actress's voice was as sweet as her face; every movement was harmonious; every look lovely. She was not a startling actress; nor was there any need of great acting in the part that had been written for her. She was Psyche—the loved, the loving, pursued by jealousy, persecuted by women's unwomanly hatred, afflicted, despairing—yet loving always; beautiful in every phase of her gentle life.

'Do you like the play?' asked the Major, grimly, when the curtain had fallen on the first act.

'I never enjoyed anything so much! It is so different from all other plays we have seen,' said Christabel; 'and Psyche—Miss Stella Mayne, is she not?—is the loveliest creature I ever saw in my life.'

'You must allow a wide margin for stage make-up, paint and powder, and darkened lashes,' grumbled the Major.

'But I have been studying her face through my glass. It is hardly at all made up. Just compare it with the faces of the two sisters, which are like china plates, badly fired. Jessie, what are you dreaming about? You haven't a particle of enthusiasm! Why don't you say something?'

'I don't want to be an echo,' said Miss Bridgeman, curtly. 'I could only repeat what you are saying. I can't be original enough to say that Miss Mayne is ugly.'

'She is simply the loveliest creature we have seen on the stage or off it,' exclaimed Christabel, who was too rustic to want to know who Miss Mayne was, and where the manager had discovered such a pearl, as a London playgoer might have done.

'Hark!' said Jessie; 'there's a knock at the door.'

Christabel's heart began to beat violently. Could it be Angus? No, it was more likely to be some officious person, offering ices.

It was neither; but a young man of the languid-elegant type—one of Christabel's devoted admirers, the very youth who had told her of his having seen 'Cupid and Psyche,' fifteen times.

'Why this makes the sixteenth time,' she said, smiling at him as they shook hands.

'I think it is nearer the twentieth,' he replied; 'it is quite the jolliest piece in London? Don't you agree with me?'

'I think it is—remarkably—jolly!' answered Christabel, laughing. 'What odd words you have in London for the expression of your ideas—and so few of them!'

'A kind of short-hand,' said the Major, 'arbitrary characters. Jolly means anything you like—awful means anything you like. That kind of language gives the widest scope for the exercise of the imagination.'

'How is Mrs. Tregonell?' asked the youth, not being given to the discussion of abstract questions, frivolous or solemn. He had a mind which could only grasp life in the concrete—an intellect that required to deal with actualities—people, coats, hats, boots, dinner, park-hack—just as little children require actual counters to calculate with.

He subsided into a chair behind Miss Courtenay, and the box being a large one, remained there for the rest of the play—to the despair of a companion youth in the stalls, who looked up ever and anon, vacuous and wondering, and who resembled his friend as closely as a well-matched carriage-horse resembles his fellow—grooming and action precisely similar.

'What brilliant diamonds!' said Christabel, noticing a collet necklace which Psyche wore in the second act, and which was a good deal out of harmony with her Greek drapery—not by any means resembling those simple golden ornaments which patient Dr. Schliemann and his wife dug out of the hill at Hissarlik. 'But, of course, they are only stage jewels,' continued Christabel; 'yet they sparkle as brilliantly as diamonds of the first water.'

'Very odd, but so they do,' muttered young FitzPelham, behind her shoulder; and then, *sotto voce* to the Major, he said—'that's the worst of giving these women jewels, they *will* wear them.'

'And that emerald butterfly on her shoulder,' pursued Christabel; 'one would suppose it were real.'

'A real butterfly?'

'No, real emeralds.'

'It belonged to the Empress of the French, and was sold for three hundred and eighty guineas at Christie's,' said FitzPelham; whereupon Major Bree's substantial boot came down heavily on the youth's Queen Anne shoe. 'At least, the Empress had one like it,' stammered FitzPelham, saying to himself, in his own vernacular, that he had 'hoofed it.'

'How do you like Stella Mayne?' he asked by-and-by, when the act was over.

'I am charmed with her. She is the sweetest actress I ever saw; not the greatest—there are two or three who far surpass her in genius; but there is a sweetness—a fascination. I don't wonder she is the rage. I only wonder Major Bree could have deprived me of the pleasure of seeing her all this time.'

'You could stand the piece a second time, couldn't you?'

'Certainly—or a third time. It is so poetical—it carries one into a new world!'

'Pretty foot and ankle, hasn't she?' murmured FitzPelham—to which frivolous comment Miss Courtenay made no reply.

Her soul was rapt in the scene before her—the mystic wood whither Psyche had now wandered with her divine lover. The darkness of a summer night in the Greek Archipelago—fire-flies flitting athwart ilex and olive bushes—a glimpse of the distant starlit sea.

Here—goaded by her jealous sisters to a fatal curiosity—Psyche stole with her lamp to the couch of her sleeping lover, gazing spell-bound upon that godlike countenance—represented in actual flesh by a chubby round face and round brown eyes—and in her glad surprise letting fall a drop of oil from her lamp on Cupid's winged shoulder—whereon the god leaves her, wounded by her want of faith. Had he not told her they must meet only in the darkness, and that she must never seek to know his name? So ends the second act of the fairy drama. In the third, poor Psyche is in ignoble bondage—a slave to Venus, in the goddess's Palace at Cythera—a fashionable, fine-lady Venus, who leads her gentle handmaiden a sorry life, till the god of love comes to her rescue. And here, in the tiring chamber of the goddess, the playwright makes sport of all the arts by which modern beauty is manufactured. Here poor Psyche—tearful, despairing—has to toil at the creation of the Queen of Beauty, whose charms of face and figure are discovered to be all falsehood, from the topmost curl of her toupet to the arched instep under her jewelled buskin. Throughout this scene Psyche alternates between smiles and tears; and then at the last Cupid appears—claims his mistress, defies his mother, and the happy lovers, linked in each other's arms, float sky-ward on a shaft of lime-light. And so the graceful mythic drama ends—fanciful from the first line to the last, gay and lightly touched as burlesque, yet with an element of poetry which burlesque for the most part lacks.

Christabel's interest had been maintained throughout the performance.

'How extraordinarily silent you have been all the evening, Jessie!' she said, as they were putting on their cloaks; 'surely, you like the play!'

'I like it pretty well. It is rather thin, I think; but then perhaps, that is because I have 'Twelfth Night' still in my memory, as we heard Mr. Brandram recite it last week at Willis's Rooms.'

'Nobody expects modern comedy to be as good as Shakespeare,' retorted Christabel; 'you might as well find fault with the electric light for not being quite equal to the moon. Don't you admire that exquisite creature?'

'Which of them?' asked Jessie, stolidly, buttoning her cloak.

'Which of them! Oh, Jessie, you have generally such good taste. Why, Miss Mayne, of course. It is almost painful to look at the others. They are such common earthy creatures, compared with her!'

'I have no doubt she is very wonderful—and she is the fashion, which goes for a great deal,' answered Miss Bridgeman; but never a word in praise of Stella Mayne could Christabel extort from her. She—who, educated by Shepherd's Bush and poverty, was much more advanced in knowledge of evil than the maiden from beyond Tamar—suspected that some sinister influence was to be feared in Stella Mayne. Why else had the Major so doggedly opposed their visit to this particular theatre? Why else did he look so glum when Stella Mayne was spoken about?

CHAPTER VIII.

LE SECRET DE POLICHINELLE.

The next day but one was Thursday—an afternoon upon which Mrs. Tregonell was in the habit of staying at home to receive callers, and a day on which her small drawing-rooms were generally filled with more or less pleasant people—chiefly of the fairer sex—from four to six. The three rooms—small by degrees and beautifully less—the old-fashioned furniture and profusion of choicest flowers—lent themselves admirably to gossip and afternoon tea, and were even conducive to mild flirtation, for there was generally a sprinkling of young men of the FitzPelham type—having nothing particular to say, but always faultless in their dress, and well-meaning as to their manners.

On this afternoon—which to Christabel seemed a day of duller hue and colder atmosphere than all previous Thursdays, on account of Angus Hamleigh's absence—there were rather more callers than usual. The season was ripening towards its close. Some few came to pay their last visit, and to inform Mrs. Tregonell and her niece about their holiday movements—generally towards the Engadine or some German Spa—the one spot of earth to which their constitution could accommodate itself at this time of year.

'I am obliged to go to Pontresina before the end of July,' said a ponderous middle-aged matron to Miss Courtenay. 'I can't breathe anywhere else in August and September.'

'I think you would find plenty of air at Boscastle,' said Christabel, smiling at her earnestness; 'but I dare say the Engadine is very nice!'

'Five thousand feet above the level of the sea,' said the matron, proudly.

'I like to be a little nearer the sea—to see it—and smell it—and feel its spray upon my face,' answered Christabel. Do you take your children with you?'

'Oh, no, they all go to Ramsgate with the governess and a maid.'

'Poor little things! And how sad for you to know that there are all those mountain passes—a three days' journey—between you and your children!'

'Yes, it is very trying!' sighed the mother; 'but they are so fond of Ramsgate; and the Engadine is the only place that suits me.'

'You have never been to Chagford?'

'Chagford! No; what is Chagford?'

'A village upon the edge of Dartmoor—all among the Devonshire hills. People go there for the fine bracing air. I can't help thinking it must do them almost as much good as the Engadine.'

'Indeed! I have heard that Devonshire is quite too lovely,' said the matron, who would have despised herself had she been familiar with her native land. 'But what have you done with Mr. Hamleigh? I am quite disappointed at not seeing him this afternoon.'

'He is in Scotland,' said Christabel, and then went on to tell as much as was necessary about her lover's journey to the North.

'How dreadfully dull you must be without him!' said the lady, sympathetically, and several other ladies—notably a baronet's widow, who had been a friend of Mrs. Tregonell's girlhood—a woman who never said a kind word of anybody, yet was invited everywhere, and who had the reputation of giving a better dinner, on a small scale, than any other lonely women in London. The rest were young women, mostly of the gushing type, who were prepared to worship Christabel because she was pretty, an heiress, and engaged to a man of some distinction in their particular world. They had all clustered round Mrs. Tregonell and her niece, in the airy front drawing-room, while Miss Bridgeman poured out tea at a Japanese table in the middle room, waited upon sedulously by Major Bree, Mr. FitzPelham and another youth, a Somerset House young man, who wrote for the Society papers—or believed that he did, on the strength of having had an essay on 'Tame Cats' accepted in the big gooseberry season—and gave himself to the world as a person familiar with the undercurrents of literary and dramatic life. The ladies made a circle round Mrs. Tregonell, and these three gentlemen, circulating with tea-cups, sugar-basins, and cream-pots, joined spasmodically in the conversation.

Christabel owned to finding a certain emptiness in life without her lover. She did not parade her devotion to him, but was much too unaffected to pretend indifference.

'We went to the theatre on Tuesday night,' she said.

'Oh, how could you!' cried the oldest and most gushing of the three young ladies. 'Without Mr. Hamleigh?'

'That was our chief reason for going. We knew we should be dull without him. We went to the Kaleidoscope, and were delighted with Psyche.'

All three young ladies gushed in chorus. Stella Mayne was quite too lovely—a poem, a revelation, and so on, and so on Lady Cumberbridge, the baronet's widow, pursed her lips and elevated her eyebrows, which, on a somewhat modified form, resembled Lord Thurlow's, but said nothing. The Somerset House young man stole a glance at Fitz-Pelham, and smiled meaningly; but the amiable Fitz-Pelham was only vacuous.

'Of course you have seen this play,' said Mrs. Tregonell turning to Lady Cumberbridge. 'You see everything, I know?'

'Yes; I make it my business to see everything—good, bad, and indifferent,' answered the strong-minded dowager, in a voice which would hardly have shamed the Lord Chancellor's wig, which those Thurlow-like eyebrows so curiously suggested. 'It is the sole condition upon which London life is worth living. If one only saw the good things, one would spend most of one's evening at home, and we don't leave our country places for *that*. I see a good deal that bores me, an immense deal that disgusts me, and a little—a very little—that I can honestly admire.'

'Then I am sure you must admire "Cupid and Psyche,"' said Christabel.

'My dear, that piece, which I am told has brought a fortune to the management, is just one of the things that I don't care to talk about before young people. I look upon it as the triumph of vice: and I wonder—yes, *very* much wonder—that *you* were allowed to see it.'

There was an awfulness about the dowager's tone as she uttered these final sentences, which out-Thurlowed Thurlow. Christabel shivered, hardly knowing why, but heartily wishing there had been no such person as Lady Cumberbridge among her aunt's London acquaintance.

'But, surely there is nothing improper in the play, dear Lady Cumberbridge,' exclaimed the eldest gusher, too long in society to shrink from sifting any question of that kind.

'There is a great deal that is improper,' replied the dowager, sternly.

'Surely not in the language: that is too lovely?' urged the gusher. 'I must be very dense, I'm afraid, for I really did not see anything objectionable.'

'You must be very blind as well as dense, if you didn't see Stella Mayne's diamonds,' retorted the dowager.

'Oh, of course I saw the diamonds. One could not help seeing them.'

'And do you think there is nothing improper in those diamonds, or their history?' demanded Lady Cumberbridge, glaring at the damsel from under those terrific eyebrows. 'If so, you must be less experienced in the ways of the world than I gave you credit for being. But I think I said before that this is a question which I do *not* care to discuss before young people—even advanced as young people are in their ways and opinions now-a-days.'

The maiden blushed at this reproof; and the conversation, steered judiciously by Mrs. Tregonell, glided on to safer topics. Yet calmly as that lady bore herself, and carefully as she managed to keep the talk among pleasant ways for the next half-hour, her mind was troubled not a little by the things that had been said about Stella Mayne. There had been a curious significance in the dowager's tone when she expressed surprise at Christabel having been allowed to see this play. That significant tone, in conjunction with Major Bree's marked opposition to Belle's wish upon this one matter, argued that there was some special reason why Belle should not see this actress. Mrs. Tregonell, like all quiet people, very observant, had seen the Somerset House young man's meaning smile as the play was mentioned. What was this peculiar something which all these people had in their minds, and of which she, Christabel's aunt, to whom the girl's welfare and happiness were vital, knew nothing?

She determined to take the most immediate and direct way of knowing all that was to be known, by questioning that peripatetic chronicle of fashionable scandal, Lady Cumberbridge. This popular personage knew a great deal more than the Society papers, and was not constrained like those prints to disguise her knowledge in Delphic hints and dark sayings. Lady Cumberbridge, like John Knox, never feared the face of man, and could be as plain-spoken and as coarse as she pleased.

'I should so like to have a few words with you by-and-by, if you don't mind waiting till these girls are gone,' murmured Mrs. Tregonell.

'Very well, my dear; get rid of them as soon as you can, for I've some people coming to dinner, and I want an hour's sleep before I put on my gown.'

The little assembly dispersed within the next quarter of an hour, and Christabel joined Jessie in the smaller drawing-room.

'You can shut the folding-doors, Belle,' said Mrs. Tregonell carelessly. 'You and Jessie are sure to be chattering; and I want a quiet talk with Lady Cumberbridge.'

Christabel obeyed, wondering a little what the quiet talk would be about, and whether by any chance it would touch upon the play last night. She, too, had been struck by the significance of the dowager's tone; and then it was so rarely that she found herself excluded from any conversation in which her aunt had part.

'Now,' said Mrs. Tregonell, directly the doors were shut, 'I want to know why Christabel should not have been allowed to see that play the other night?'

'What!' cried Lady Cumberbridge, 'don't you know why?'

'Indeed, no. I did not go with them, so I had no opportunity of judging as to the play.'

'My dear soul,' exclaimed the deep voice of the dowager, 'it is not the play—the play is well enough—it is the woman! And do you really mean to tell me that you don't know?'

'That I don't know what?'

'Stella Mayne's history?'

'What should I know of her more than of any other actress? They are all the same to me, like pictures, which I admire or not, from the outside. I am told that some are women of fashion who go everywhere, and that it is a privilege to know them; and that some one ought hardly to speak about, though one may go to see them, while there are others——'

'Who hover like stars between two worlds,' said Lady Cumberbridge. 'Yes, that's all true. And nobody has told you anything about Stella Mayne?'

'No one!'

'Then I'm very sorry I mentioned her to you. I dare say you will hate me if I tell you the truth: people always do; because, in point of fact, truth is generally hateful. We can't afford to live up to it.'

'I shall be grateful to you if you will tell me all that there is to be told about this actress, who seems in some way to be concerned——'

'In your niece's happiness? Well, no, my dear, we will hope not. It is all a thing of the past. Your friends have been remarkably discreet. It is really extraordinary that you should have heard nothing about it; but, on reflection, I think it is really better you should know the fact. Stella Mayne is the young woman for whom Mr. Hamleigh nearly ruined himself three years ago.'

Mrs. Tregonell turned white as death.

Her mind had not been educated to the acceptance of sin and folly as a natural element in a young man's life. In her view of mankind the good men were all Bayards—fearless, stainless; the bad were a race apart, to be shunned by all good women. To be told that her niece's future husband—the man for whose sake her whole scheme of life had been set aside, the man whom Christabel and she had so implicitly trusted—was a fashionable libertine—the lover of an actress—the talk of the town—was a revelation that changed the whole colour of life.

'Are you sure that this is true?' she asked falteringly.

'My dear creature, do I ever say anything that isn't true? There is no need to invent things. God knows the things people do are bad enough, and wild enough, to supply conversation for everybody. But this about Hamleigh and Stella Mayne is as well known as the Albert Memorial. He was positively infatuated about her; took her off the stage: she was in the back row of the ballet at Drury Lane, salary seventeen and sixpence a week. He lived with her in Italy for a year; then they came back to England, and he gave her a house in St. John's Wood; squandered his money upon her; had her educated; worshipped her, in fact; and, I am told, would have married her, if she had only behaved herself. Fortunately, these women never do behave themselves: they show the cloven-foot too soon; *our* people only go wrong after marriage. But I hope, my dear, you will not allow yourself to be worried by this business. It is all a thing of the past, and Hamleigh will make just as good a husband as if it had never happened; better, perhaps, for he will be all the more able to appreciate a pure-minded girl like your niece.'

Mrs. Tregonell listened with a stony visage. She was thinking of Leonard—Leonard who had never done wrong, in this way, within his mother's knowledge—who had been cheated out of his future wife by a flashy trickster—a man who talked like a poet, and who yet had given his first passionate love, and the best and brightest years of his life to a stage-dancer.

'How long is it since Mr. Hamleigh has ceased to be devoted to Miss Mayne?' she asked, in a cold, dull voice.

'I cannot say exactly: one hears so many different stories; there were paragraphs in the Society papers last season: 'A certain young sprig of fashion, a general favourite, whose infatuation for a well-known actress has been a matter of regret among the *haute volée*, is said to have broken his bonds. The lady keeps her diamonds, and threatens to publish his letters,' and so on, and so forth. You know the kind of thing?'

'I do not,' said Mrs. Tregonell. 'I have never taken any interest in such paragraphs.'

'Ah! that is the consequence of vegetating at the fag-end of England: all the pungency is taken out of life for you.'

Mrs. Tregonell asked no further questions. She had made up her mind that any more detailed information, which she might require, must be obtained from another channel. She did not want this battered woman of the world to know how hard she was hit. Yes—albeit there was a far-off gleam of light amidst this darkness—she was profoundly hurt by the knowledge of Angus Hamleigh's wrong-doing. He had made himself very dear to her—dear from the tender association of the past—dear for his own sake. She had believed him a man of scrupulous honour, of pure and spotless life. Perhaps she had taken all this for granted, in her rustic simplicity, seeing that all his ideas and instincts were those of a gentleman. She had made no allowance for the fact that the will-o'-the-wisp, passionate love, may lure even a gentleman into swampy ground; and that his sole superiority over profligates of coarser clay will be to behave himself like a gentleman in those morasses whither an errant fancy has beguiled him.

'I hope you will not let this influence your feelings towards Mr. Hamleigh,' said Lady Cumberbridge; 'if you did so, I should really feel sorry for having told you. But you must inevitably have heard the story from somebody else before long.'

'No doubt. I suppose everybody knows it.'

'Why yes, it was tolerably notorious. They used to be seen everywhere together. Mr. Hamleigh seemed proud of his infatuation, and there were plenty of men in his own set to encourage him. Modern society has adopted Danton's motto, don't you know?—*de l'audace, encore de l'audace et toujours de l'audace!* And now I must go and get my siesta, or I shall be as stupid as an owl all the evening. Good-bye.'

Mrs. Tregonell sat like a statue, absorbed in thought, for a considerable time after Lady Cumberbridge's departure. What was she to do? This horrid story was true, no doubt. Major

Bree would be able to confirm it presently, when he came back to dinner, as he had promised to come. What was she to do? Allow the engagement to go on?—allow an innocent and pure-minded girl to marry a man whose infatuation for an actress had been town talk; who had come to Mount Royal fresh from that evil association—wounded to the core, perhaps, by the base creature's infidelity—and seeking consolation wherever it might offer; bringing his second-hand feelings, with all the bloom worn off them, to the shrine of innocent young beauty!—dedicating the mere ashes of burned-out fires to the woman who was to be his wife; perhaps even making scornful comparisons between her simple rustic charms and the educated fascinations of the actress; bringing her the leavings of a life—the mere dregs of youth's wine-cup! Was Christabel to be permitted to continue under this shameful delusion—to believe that she was receiving all when she was getting nothing? No!—ten thousand times, no! It was womanhood's stern duty to come to the rescue of guileless, too-trusting girlhood. Bitter as the ordeal must needs be for both, Christabel must be told the whole cruel truth. Then it would be for her own heart to decide. She would still be a free agent. But surely her own purity of feeling would teach her to decide rightly—to renounce the lover who had so fooled and cheated her—and, perhaps, later to reward the devotion of that other adorer who had loved her from boyhood upwards with a steady unwavering affection—chiefly demonstrated by the calm self-assured manner in which he had written of Christabel—in his letters to his mother—as his future wife, the possibility of her rejection of that honour never having occurred to his rustic intelligence.

Christabel peeped in through the half-opened door.

'Well, Aunt Di, is your conference over? Has her ladyship gone?'

'Yes, dear; I am trying to coax myself to sleep,' answered Mrs. Tregonell from the depths of her arm-chair.

'Then I'll go and dress for dinner. Ah, how I only wish there were a chance of Angus coming back to-night!' sighed Christabel, softly closing the door.

Major Bree came in ten minutes afterwards.

'Come here, and sit by my side,' said Mrs. Tregonell. 'I want to talk to you seriously.'

The Major complied, feeling far from easy in his mind.

'How pale you look!' he said; 'is there anything wrong?'

'Yes—everything is wrong! You have treated me very badly. You have been false to me and to Christabel!'

'That is rather a wide accusation,' said the Major, calmly. He knew perfectly well what was coming, and that he should require all his patience—all that sweetness of temper which had been his distinction through life—in order to leaven the widow's wrath against the absent. 'Perhaps, you won't think it too much trouble to explain the exact nature of my offence?'

Mrs. Tregonell told him Lady Cumberbridge's story.

'Did you, or did you not, know this last October?' she asked.

'I had heard something about it when I was in London two years before.'

'And you did not consider it your duty to tell me?'

'Certainly not. I told you at the time, when I came back from town, that your young protégé's life had been a trifle wild. Miss Bridgeman remembered the fact, and spoke of it the night Hamleigh came to Mount Royal. When I saw how matters were going with Belle and Hamleigh, I made it my business to question him, considering myself Belle's next friend; and he assured me, as between man and man, that the affair with Stella Mayne was over—that he had broken with her formally and finally. From first to last I believe he acted wonderfully well in the business.'

'Acted well?—acted well, to be the avowed lover of such a woman!—to advertise his devotion to her—associate his name with hers irrevocably—for you know that the world never forgets these alliances—and then to come to Mount Royal, and practise upon our provincial ignorance, and offer his battered life to my niece? Was that well?'

You could hardly wish him to have told your niece the whole story. Besides, it is a thing of the past. No man can go through life with the burden of his youthful follies hanging round his neck, and strangling him.'

'The past is as much a part of a man's life as the present. I want my niece's husband to be a man of an unstained past.'

'Then you will have to wait a long time for him. My dear Mrs. Tregonell, pray be reasonable, just commonly reasonable! There is not a family in England into which Angus Hamleigh would not be received with open arms, if he offered himself as a suitor. Why should you draw a hard-and-fast line, sacrifice Belle's happiness to a chimerical idea of manly virtue? You cant' have King Arthur for your niece's husband, and if you could, perhaps you wouldn't care about him. Why not be content with Lancelot, who has sinned, and is sorry for his sin; and of whom may be spoken praise almost as noble as those famous words Sir Bohort spoke over his friend's dead body.'

'I shall not sacrifice Belle's happiness. If she were my daughter I should take upon myself to judge for her, and while I lived she should never see Angus Hamleigh's face again. But she is my sister's child, and I shall give her the liberty of judgment.'

'You don't mean that you will tell her this story?'

Most decidedly.'

'For God's sake, don't!—you will spoil her happiness for ever. To you and me, who must have some knowledge of the world, it ought to be a small thing that a man has made a fool of himself about an actress. We ought to know for how little that kind of folly counts in a lifetime. But for a girl brought up like Christabel it will mean disenchantment—doubt—perhaps a lifetime of jealousy and self-torment. For mercy's sake, be reasonable in this matter! I am talking to you as if I were Christabel's father, remember. I suppose that old harridan, Lady Cumberbridge, told you this precious story. Such women ought to be put down by Act of Parliament. Yes, there should be a law restricting every unattached female over five-and-forty to a twenty-mile radius of her country-house. After that age their tongues are dangerous.'

'My friend Lady Cumberbridge told me facts which seem to be within everybody's knowledge; and she told them at my particular request. Your rudeness about her does not make the case any better for Mr. Hamleigh, or for you.'

'I think I had better go and dine at my club,' said the Major. perfectly placid.

'No, stay, please. You have proved yourself a broken reed to lean upon; but still you are a reed.'

'If I stay it will be to persuade you to spare Belle the knowledge of this wretched story.'

'I suppose he has almost ruined himself for the creature,' said Mrs. Tregonell, glancing at the subject for the first time from a practical point of view.

'He spent a good many thousands, but as he had no other vices—did not race or gamble—his fortune survived the shock. His long majority allowed for considerable accumulations, you see. He began life with a handsome capital in hand. I dare say Miss Mayne sweated that down for him!'

'I don't want to go into details—I only want to know how far he deceived us?'

'There was no deception as to his means—which are ample—nor as to the fact that he is entirely free from the entanglement we have been talking about. Every one in London knows that the affair was over and done with more than a year ago.'

The two girls came down to the drawing-room, and dinner was announced. It was a very dismal dinner—the dreariest that had ever been eaten in that house, Christabel thought. Mrs. Tregonell was absorbed in her own thoughts, absent, automatic in all she said and did. The Major maintained a forced hilarity, which was more painful than silence. Jessie looked anxious.

'I'll tell you what, girls,' said Major Bree, as the mournful meal languished towards its melancholy close, 'we seem all very doleful without Hamleigh. I'll run round to Bond Street directly after dinner, and see if I can get three stalls for "Lohengrin." They are often to be had at the last moment.'

'Please don't,' said Christabel, earnestly; 'I would not go to a theatre again without Angus. I am sorry I went the other night. It was obstinate and foolish of me to insist upon seeing that play, and I was punished for it by that horrid old woman this afternoon.'

'But you liked the play?'

'Yes—while I was seeing it; but now I have taken a dislike to Miss Mayne. I feel as if I had seen a snake—all grace and lovely colour—and had caught hold of it, only to find that it was a snake.'

The Major stared and looked alarmed. Was this an example of instinct superior to reason?

'Let me try for the opera,' he said. 'I'm sure it would do you good to go. You will sit in the front drawing-room listening for hansoms all the evening, fancying that every pair of wheels you hear is bringing Angus back to you.'

'I would rather be doing that than be sitting at the opera, thinking of him. But I'm afraid there's no chance of his coming to-night. His letter to-day told me that his aunt insists upon his staying two or three days longer, and that she is ill enough to make him anxious to oblige her.

The evening passed in placid dreariness. Mrs. Tregonell sat brooding in her arm-chair—pondering whether she should or should not tell Christabel everything—knowing but too well how the girl's happiness was dependent upon her undisturbed belief in her lover, yet repeating to herself again and again that it was right and fair that Christabel should know the truth—nay, ever so much better that she should be told it now, when she was still free to shape her own future, than that she should make the discovery later, when she was Angus Hamleigh's wife. This last consideration—the thought, that a secret which was everybody's secret must inevitably, sooner or later, become known to Christabel—weighed heavily with Mrs. Tregonell; and through all her meditations there was interwoven the thought of her absent son, and how his future welfare might depend upon the course to be taken now.

Christabel played and sang, while the Major and Jessie Bridgeman sat at bezique. The friendship of these two had been in no wise disturbed by the Major's offer, and the lady's rejection. It was the habit of both to take life pleasantly. Jessie took pains to show the Major how sincerely she valued his esteem—how completely she appreciated the fine points of his character; and he was too much a gentleman to remind her by one word or tone of his disappointment that day in the wood above Maidenhead.

The evening came to its quiet end at last. Christabel had scarcely left her piano in the dim little third room—she had sat there in the faint light, playing slow sleepy nocturnes and lieder, and musing, musing sadly, with a faint sick dread of coming sorrow. She had seen it in her aunt's face. When the old buhl clock chimed the half-hour after ten the Major got up and took his leave, bending over Mrs. Tregonell as he pressed her hand at parting to murmur: 'Remember,' with an accent as solemn as Charles the Martyr's when he spoke to Juxon.

Mrs. Tregonell answered never a word. She had been pondering and wavering all the evening, but had come to no fixed conclusion.

She bade the two girls good-night directly the Major was gone. She told herself that she had the long tranquil night before her for the resolution of her doubts. She would sleep upon this vexed question. But before she had been ten minutes in her room there came a gentle knock at the door, and Christabel stole softly to her side.

'Auntie, dear, I want to talk to you before you go to bed, if you are not very tired. May Dormer go for a little while?'

Dormer, gravest and most discreet of handmaids, whose name seemed to have been made on purpose for her, looked at her mistress, and receiving a little nod, took up her work and crept away. Dormer was never seen without her needlework. She complained that there was so little to do for Mrs. Tregonell that unless she had plenty of plain sewing she must expire for want of occupation, having long outlived such frivolity as sweethearts and afternoons out.

When Dormer was gone, Christabel came to her aunt's chair, and knelt down beside it, just as she had done at Mount Royal, when she told her of Angus Hamleigh's offer.

'Aunt Diana, what has happened, what is wrong?' she asked, coming at the heart of the question at once. There was no shadow of doubt in her mind that something was sorely amiss.

'How do you know that there is anything wrong?'

'I have known it ever since that horrible old woman—Medusa in a bonnet all over flowers—pansies instead of snakes—talked about Cupid and Psyche. And you knew it, and made her stop to tell you all about it. There is some cruel mystery—something that involves my fate with that of the actress I saw the other night.'

Mrs. Tregonell sat with her hands tightly clasped, her brows bent. She felt herself taken by storm, as it were, surprised into decision before she had time to make up her mind.

'Since you know so much, perhaps you had better know all,' she said, gloomily; and then she told the story, shaping it as delicately as she could for a girl's ear.

Christabel covered her face with her clasped hands, and listened without a sigh or a tear. The pain she felt was too dull and vague as yet for the relief of tears. The horrible surprise, the sudden darkening of the dream of her young life, the clouding over of every hope, these were shapeless horrors which she could hardly realize at first. Little by little this serpent would unfold its coils; drop by drop this poison would steal through her veins, until its venom filled her heart. He, whom she had supposed all her own, with whose every thought she had fancied herself familiar, he, of whose heart she had believed herself the sole and sovereign mistress, had been one little year ago the slave of another—loving with so passionate a love that he had not shrunk from letting all the world know his idolatry. Yes, all those people who had smiled at her, and said sweet things to her, and congratulated her on her engagement, had known all the while that this lover, of whom she was so proud, was only the cast-off idolator of an actress; had come to her only when life's master-passion was worn threadbare, and had become a stale and common thing for him. At the first, womanly pride felt the blow as keenly as womanly love. To be made a mock of by the man she had so loved!

Kneeling there in dumb misery at her aunt's feet, answering never a word to that wretched record of her lover's folly, Christabel's thoughts flew back to that still grey autumn noontide at Pentargon Bay, and the words then spoken. Words, which then had only vaguest meaning, now rose out of the dimness of the past, and stood up in her mind as if they had been living creatures. He had compared himself to Tristran—to one who had sinned and repented—he had spoken of himself as a man whose life had been more than half-lived already. He had offered himself to her with no fervid passion—with no assured belief in her power to make him happy. Nay, he had rather forced from her the confession of her love by his piteous representation of himself as a man doomed to early death. He had wrung from her the offer of a life's devotion. She had given herself to him almost unwooed. Never before had her betrothal appeared to her in this humiliating aspect; but now, enlightened by the knowledge of that former love, a love so reckless and self-sacrificing, it seemed to her that the homage offered her had been of the coldest—that her affection had been placidly accepted, rather than passionately demanded of her.

'Fool, fool, fool,' she said within herself, bowed to the dust by this deep humiliation.

'My darling, why don't you speak to me?' said Mrs. Tregonell tenderly, with her arm round the girl's neck, her face leaning down to touch that drooping head.

'What can I say? I feel as if my life had suddenly come to an end, and there were nothing left for me to do, except just to sit still and remember what has been.'

'You mean to break with him?'

'Break with him! Why he has never been mine. There is nothing to be broken. It was all a delusion and a dream. I thought he loved me—loved me exactly as I loved him—with the one great and perfect love of a lifetime—and now I know that he never loved me—how could he after having only just left off loving this other woman?—if he had left off loving her. And how could he when she is so perfectly lovely? Why should he have ever ceased to care for her? She had been like his wife, you say—his wife in all but the name—and all the world knew it. What must people have thought of me for stealing away another woman's husband?'

'My dear, the world does not see it in that light. She never was really his wife.'

'She ought to have been,' answered Christabel, resolutely, yet with quivering lips. 'If he cared for her so much as to make himself the world's wonder for her sake he should have married her: a man should not play fast and loose with love.'

'It is difficult for us to judge,' said Mrs. Tregonell, believing herself moved by the very spirit of justice, 'we are not women of the world—we cannot see this matter as the world sees it.'

'God forbid that I should judge as the world judges!' exclaimed Christabel, lifting her head for the first time since that story had been told her. 'That would be a sorry end of your teaching. What ought I to do?'

'Your own heart must be the arbiter, Christabel. I made up my mind this afternoon that I would not seek to influence you one way or the other. Your own heart must decide.'

'My own heart? No; my heart is too entirely his—too weakly, fondly, foolishly, devoted to him. No, I must think of something beyond my foolish love for him. His honour and mine are at stake. We must be true to ourselves, he and I. But I want to know what you think, Auntie. I want to know what you would have done in such a case. If, when you were engaged to his father, you had discovered that he had been within only a little while'—these last words were spoken with inexpressible pathos, as if here the heart-wound were deepest—'the lover of another woman—bound to her by ties which a man of honour should hold sacred—what would you have done? Would you have shut your eyes resolutely upon that past history? Would you have made up your mind to forget everything, and to try to be happy with him?'

'I don't know, Belle,' Mrs. Tregonell answered, helplessly, very anxious to be true and conscientious, and if she must needs be guide, to guide the girl aright through this perilous passage in her life. 'It is so difficult at my age to know what one would have done in one's girlhood. The fires are all burnt out; the springs that moved one then are all broken. Judging now, with the dull deliberation of middle age, I should say it would be a dangerous thing for any girl to marry a man who had been notoriously devoted to another woman—that woman still living, still having power to charm him. How can you ever be secure of his love? how be sure that he would not be lured back to the old madness? These women are so full of craft—it is their profession to tempt men to destruction. You remember what the Bible says of such? "They are more bitter than death: their feet go down to death: their steps take hold on hell."'

'Don't, Auntie,' faltered Christabel. 'Yes, I understand. Yes, he would tire of me, and go back to her very likely. I am not half so lovely, nor half so fascinating. Or, if he were true to honour and duty, he would regret her all his life. He would be always repenting that he had not broken down all barriers and married her. He would see her sometimes on the stage, or in the Park, and just the sight of her face flashing past him would spoil his happiness. Happiness,' she repeated, bitterly, 'what happiness? what peace could there be for either of us, knowing of that fatal love. I have decided, Auntie, I shall love Angus all the days of my life, but I will never marry him.'

Mrs. Tregonell clasped the girl in her arms, and they wept together, one with the slow silent tears of life that was well-nigh worn out, the other with youth's passionate sobs—sobs that shook the slender frame.

'My beloved, you have chosen wisely, and well,' said the widow, her heart throbbing with new hopes—it was not of Angus Hamleigh's certain loss she thought, but of her son Leonard's probable gain—'you have chosen wisely. I do not believe that you could ever have been really happy with him. Your heart would have been consumed with jealous fears—suspicion would have haunted your life—that evil woman's influence would have darkened all your days.'

'Don't say another word,' pleaded Christabel, in low hoarse tones; 'I have quite made up my mind. Nothing can change it.

She did not want to be encouraged or praised; she did not want comfort or consolation. Even her aunt's sympathy jarred upon her fretted nerves. She felt that she must stand alone in her misery, aloof from all human succour.

'Good-night,' she said, bending down to touch her aunt's forehead, with tremulous lips.

'Won't you stay, dear? Sleep with me to-night.'

'Sleep?' echoed the girl. 'No, Auntie dear; I would rather be in my own room!'

She went away without another word, and went slowly back to her own room, the pretty little London bedchamber, bright with new satin-wood furniture and pale blue cretonne hangings, clouded with creamy Indian muslin, a bower-like room, with flowers and books, and a miniature piano in a convenient recess by the fire-place. Here she sat gravely down before her davenport and unlocked one particular drawer, a so-called secret drawer, but as obvious as a secret panel in a melodrama—and took out Angus Hamleigh's letters. The long animated letters written on thin paper, letters which were a journal of his thoughts and feelings, almost as fully recorded as in those voluminous epistles which Werther despatched to his friend—letters which had bridged over the distance between Cornwall and Southern France, and had been the chief delight of Christabel's life through the long slow winter, making her lover her daily companion.

Slowly, slowly, with tears dropping unnoticed every now and then, she turned over the letters, one by one—now pausing to read a few lines—now a whole letter. There is no loving folly of which she had not been guilty with regard to these cherished letters: she had slept with them under her pillow, she had read them over and over again, had garnered them in a perfumed desk, and gone back to them after the lapse of time, had compared them in her own mind with all the cleverest letters that ever were given to the world—with Walpole, with Beckford, with Byron, with Deffand, and Espinasse, Sevigné, Carter—and found in them a grace and a charm that surpassed all these. She had read elegant extracts to her aunt, who confessed that Mr. Hamleigh wrote cleverly, wittily, picturesquely, poetically, but did not perceive that immeasurable superiority to all previous letter-writers. Then came briefer letters, dated from the Albany—notes dashed off hastily in those happy days when their lives were spent for the most part together. Notes containing suggestions for some new pleasure—appointments—sweet nothings, hardly worth setting down except as an excuse for writing—with here and there a longer letter, written after midnight; a letter in which the writer poured out his soul to his beloved, enlarging on their conversation of the day—that happy talk about themselves and love.

'Who would think, reading these, that he never really cared for me, that I was only an after-thought in his life,' she said to herself, bitterly.

'Did he write just such letters to Stella Mayne, I wonder? No; there was no need for writing—they were always together.'

The candles on her desk had burnt low by the time her task was done. Faint gleams of morning stole through the striped blinds, as she sealed the packet in which she had folded that lengthy history of Angus Hamleigh's courtship—a large square packet, tied with stout red tape, and sealed in several places. Her hand hardly faltered as she set her seal upon the wax; her purpose was so strong.

'Yes,' she said to herself, 'I will do what is best and safest for his honour and for mine.' And then she knelt by her bed and prayed long and fervently; and remained upon her knees reading the Gospel as the night melted away and the morning sun flooded her room with light.

She did not even attempt to sleep, trusting to her cold bath for strength against the day's ordeal. She thought all the time she was dressing of the task that lay before her—the calm deliberate cancelment of her engagement, with the least possible pain for the man she loved, and for his ultimate gain in this world and the next. Was it not for the welfare of a man's soul that he should do his duty and repair the wrong that he had done; rather than that he should conform to the world's idea of the fitness of things and make an eminently respectable marriage?

Christabel contemplated herself critically in the glass as she brushed her hair. Her eyelids were swollen with weeping—her cheeks pallid, her eyes lustreless, and at this disadvantage she compared herself with that vivid and sylph-like beauty she had seen at the Kaleidoscope.

'How could he ever forget her for my sake?' she thought, looking at that sad colourless face, and falling into the common error that only the most beautiful women are loved with perfect love, that perfection of feeling answers to perfection of form—forgetting how the history of life shows that upon the unlovely also there have been poured treasures of deepest, purest love—that, while beauty charms and wins all, there is often one, best worth the winning, who is to be vanquished by some subtler charm, held by some less obvious chain than Aphrodite's rosy garlands. Perhaps, if Miss Courtenay had been a plain woman, skilled in the art of making the most of small advantages, she would have had more faith in her own power; but being a lovely woman who had been so trained and taught as to think very little of her own beauty, she was all the more ready to acknowledge the superior loveliness of a rival.

'Having worshipped that other fairer face, how could he care for me?' she asked herself; and then, brooding upon every detail of their betrothal, she came to the bitter conclusion that Angus had offered himself to her out of pity—touched by her too obvious affection for him—love which she had hardly tried to hide from him, when once he had told her of his early doom, That storm of pity and regret which had swept over her heart had annihilated her womanly pride: she forgot all that was due to her own dignity, and was only too eager to offer herself as the companion and consoler of his brief days. She looked back and remembered her folly—thinking of herself as a creature caught in a trap.

No, assuredly, there was but one remedy.

One doubt—one frail straw of hope to which she might cling—yet remained. That tried, all was decided. Was this story true—completely and positively a fact? She had heard so much in society about baseless scandals—she had been told so many versions of the same story—as unlike as black to white or false to true—and she was not going to take this one bitter fact for granted upon the strength of any fashionable Medusa who might try to turn her warm beating heart to stone. Before she accepted Medusa's sentence she would discover for herself how far this story was true.

'I will give no one any trouble,' she thought: 'I will act for myself, and judge for myself. It will be the making or marring of three lives.'

In her wide charity, in that power to think and feel for others, which was the highest gift of her rich sweet soul, Stella Mayne seemed to Christabel as important a factor in this life-problem as herself or Angus. She thought of her tenderly, picturing her as a modern Gretchen, tempted by an early and intense love, much more than by the devil's lure of splendour and jewels—a poor little Gretchen at seventeen and sixpence a week, living in a London garret, with no mother to watch and warn, and with wicked old Marthas in plenty to whisper bad advice.

Christabel went down to breakfast as usual. Her quiet face and manner astonished Mrs. Tregonell, who had slept very little better than her niece; but when the servant came in to ask if she would ride she refused.

'Do, dear,' pleaded her aunt; 'a nice long country ride by Finchley and Hendon would do you good.'

'No, Aunt Di—I would rather be at home this morning,' answered Christabel; so the man departed, with an order for the carriage at the usual hour in the afternoon.

There was a letter from Angus—Christabel only glanced at the opening lines, which told her that he was to stay at Hillside a few days longer, and then put the letter in her pocket. Jessie Bridgeman looked at her curiously—knowing very well that there was something sorely amiss—but waiting to be told what this sudden cloud of sorrow meant.

Christabel went back to her own room directly after breakfast. Her aunt forebore any attempt at consolation, knowing it was best to let the girl bear her grief in her own way

'You will go with me for a drive after luncheon, dear?' she asked.

'Yes, Auntie—but I would rather we went a little way in the country, if you don't mind, instead of to the Park?'

'With all my heart: I have had quite enough of the Park.'

'The "booing, and booing, and booing,"' said Jessie, 'and the straining one's every nerve to see the Princess drive by—only to discover the humiliating fact that she is one of the very few respectable-looking women in the Park—perhaps the only one who can look absolutely respectable without being a dowdy.'

'Shall I go to her room and try if I can be of any comfort to her?' mused Jessie, as she went up to her own snug little den on the third floor. 'Better not, perhaps. I like to hug my sorrows. I should hate any one who thought their prattle could lessen my pain. She will bear hers best alone, I dare say. But what can it be? Not any quarrel with him. They could hardly quarrel by telegraph or post—they who are all honey when they are together. It is some scandal—something that old demon with the eyebrows said yesterday. I am sure of it—a talk between two elderly women with closed doors always means Satan's own mischief.'

All three ladies went out in the carriage after luncheon—a dreary, dusty drive, towards Edgware—past everlasting bricks and mortar, as it seemed to Christabel's tired eyes, which gazed at the houses as if they had been phantoms, so little human meaning had they for her—so little did she realize that in each of those brick and plaster packing-cases human beings lived, and. in their turn, suffered some such heart-agony as this which she was enduring to-day.

'That is St. John's Wood up yonder, isn't it?' she asked, as they passed Carlton Hill, speaking for almost the first time since they left Mayfair.

'Yes.'

'Isn't it somewhere about there Miss Stella Mayne lives, the actress we saw the other night?' asked Christabel, carelessly.

Her aunt looked at her with intense surprise,—how could she pronounce *that* name, and to ask a frivolous question?

'Yes; she has a lovely house called the Rosary. Mr. Fitz-Pelham told me about it,' answered Jessie.

Christabel said never a word more as the carriage rolled on by Cricklewood and the two Welsh Harps, and turned into the quiet lanes about Hendon, and so home by the Finchley Road. She had found out what she wanted to know.

When afternoon tea was served in the little third drawing-room, where Mrs. Tregonell sat resting herself after the dust and weariness of the drive, Christabel was missing. Dormer brought a little note for her mistress.

'Miss Courtenay gave me this just before she went out, ma'am.'

'Out! Has Miss Courtenay gone out?'

'Yes, ma'am; Daniel got her a cab five minutes ago.'

'To her dressmaker, I suppose,' said Mrs. Tregonell, trying to look indifferent.

'Don't be uneasy about me, Auntie,' wrote Christabel: 'I am going on an errand about which I made up my mind last night. I may be a little late for dinner, but as I shall go and return in the same cab, you may feel sure that I shall be quite safe. Don't wait dinner for me.'

CHAPTER IX.

'LOVE IS LOVE FOR EVERMORE.'

The Rosary, St. John's Wood: that was the address which Christabel had given the cabman. Had any less distinguished person than Stella Mayne lived at the Rosary it might have taken the cabman all the evening to find that particular house, with no more detailed address as to road and number. But a brother whip on a rank near Hamilton Terrace was able to tell Christabel's cabman the way to the Rosary. It was a house at which hansoms were often wanted at unholy hours between midnight and sunrise—a house whose chief hospitality took the form of chablis and oysters after the play—a house which seldom questioned poor cabby's claim or went closely into mileage—a house which deserved and commanded respectful mention on the rank.

'The Rosary—yes, that's where Miss Mayne lives. Beech Tree Road—a low 'ouse with veranders all round—yer can't miss it.'

The cabman rattled away to Grove End Road, and thence to the superior quietude and seclusion of Beech Tree Road, where he drew up at a house with a glazed entrance. He rang the bell, and Christabel alighted before the summons was answered.

'Is Miss Mayne at home?' she asked a servant in plain clothes—a servant of unquestionable respectability.

'Yes, ma'am,' he replied, and preceded her along a corridor, glass-roofed, richly carpeted, and with a bank of hothouse flowers on either side.

Only at this ultimate moment did Christabel's courage begin to falter. She felt as if she were perhaps entering a den of vice. Innocent, guileless as she was, she had her own vague ideas about vice—exaggerated as all ignorant ideas are apt to be. She began to shiver as she walked over the dark subdued velvet pile of that shadowy corridor. If she had found Miss Mayne engaged in giving a masked ball—or last night's supper party only just finishing—or a party of young men playing blind hookey, she would hardly have been surprised—not that she knew anything about masked balls—or late suppers—or gambling—but that all these would have come within her vague notions of an evil life.

'*He* loved her,' she said to herself, arguing against this new terror, 'and he could not love a thoroughly wicked woman.'

No, the Gretchen idea—purity fallen, simplicity led astray—was more natural—but one could hardly imagine Gretchen in a house of this kind—this subdued splendour—this all-pervading air of wealth and luxury.

Miss Courtenay was shown into a small morning-room—a room which on one side was all window—opening on to a garden, where some fine old trees gave an idea of space—and where the foreground showed a mass of flowers—roses—roses—roses everywhere—trailing over arches—clustering round tall iron rods—bush roses—standard roses—dwarf roses—all shining in the golden light of a westering sun.

The room was elegantly simple—an escritoire in the Sherraton style—two or three book-tables crowded with small volumes in exquisite binding, vellum, creamy calf, brown Russia, red edges, gold edges, painted edges, all the prettinesses of bookbinding—half a dozen low chairs—downy nests covered with soft tawny Indian silk, with here and there a brighter patch of colour in the shape of a plush pillow or an old brocade antimacassar—voluminous curtains of the same soft tawny silk, embroidered with poppies and cornflowers—a few choice flowers in old Venetian vases—a large peacock-feather fan thrown beside an open book, upon a low pillow-shaped ottoman.

Christabel gazed round the room in blank surprise—nothing gaudy—nothing vulgar—nothing that indicated sudden promotion from the garret to the drawing-room—an air of elegant luxury, of supreme fashion in all things—but no glare of gilding, no discords in form or colour.

'Your name, if you please, madam?' said the servant, a model of decorum in well-brushed black.

'Perhaps you had better take my card. I am not personally known to Miss Mayne,' answered Christabel, opening her card-case. 'Oh!' she exclaimed suddenly, as with a cry of pain.

'I beg your pardon,' said the servant, alarmed.

'It's nothing. A picture startled me—that was all. Be good enough to tell Miss Mayne that I shall be very much obliged to her if she will see me.'

'Certainly, madam! said the man, as he retired with the card, wondering how a young lady of such distinguished appearance happened to call upon his mistress, whose feminine visitors were usually of a more marked type.

'I dare say she's collectin' funds for one of their everlastin' churches,' thought the butler, ''igh, low, or Jack, as I call 'em—'igh church, low church, or John Wesley—ever so many predominations, and all of 'em equally keen after money. But why did she almost s'riek when she clapt her eyes on Mr. 'Amleigh's portrait, I wonder, just as if she had seen a scorpiont.'

Christabel stood motionless where the man left her, looking at a photograph on a brass easel upon an old ebony table in the middle of the room. A cluster of stephanotis in a low Venetian vase stood in front of that portrait, like flowers before a shrine. It was an exquisitely painted photograph of Angus Hamleigh—Angus at his best and brightest, before the flush and glory of youth had faded from eyes and brow—Angus with a vivacity of expression which she had never seen in his face—she who had known him only since the fatal hereditary disease had set its mark upon him.

'Ah!' she sighed, 'he was happier when he loved her than he ever was with me.'

She stood gazing at that pictured face, her hands clasped, her heart beating heavily. Everything confirmed her in her despair—in her iron resolve. At last with a long-drawn sigh, she withdrew her eyes from the picture, and began to explore the room. No, there was no trace of vulgarity—no ugly indication of a vicious mind. Christabel glanced at the open book on the ottoman, half expecting to find the trail of the serpent there—in some shameful French novel, the very name of which she had not been allowed to hear. But the book was only the last *Contemporary Review*, open at an article of Gladstone's. Then, with faintly tremulous hand, she took one of the vellum-bound duodecimos from a shelf of the revolving book-table—'Selections from Shelley'—and on the title-page, 'Angus to Stella, Rome,' and the date, just three years old, in the hand she knew so well. She looked in other books—all choicest flowers of literature—and in each there was the same familiar penmanship, sometimes with a brief sentence that made the book a *souvenir*—sometimes with a passionate line from Shakespeare or Dante, Heine or De Musset. Christabel remembered, with a sharp pang of jealousy, that her lover had never so written in any book he had given her. She ignored the change which a year or two may make in a man's character, when he has reached one of the turning points of life; and how a graver deeper phase of feeling, less eager to express itself in other people's flowery language, succeeds youth's fervid sentiment. Had Werther lived and loved a second Charlotte, assuredly he would have loved her after a wiser and graver fashion. But Christabel had believed herself her lover's first and only love, and finding that she was but the second volume in his life, abandoned herself at once to despair.

She sank into one of the low luxurious chairs, just as the door opened, and Miss Mayne came into the room.

If she had looked lovely as Psyche, in her classic drapery, with the emerald butterfly on her shoulder, she looked no less beautiful in the costly-simplicity of her home toilet. She wore a sacque-shaped tea-gown of soft French-grey silk, lined with palest pink satin, over a petticoat that seemed a mass of cream-coloured lace. Her only ornaments were three half-hoop rings—rubies, diamonds, and sapphires—too large for the slender third finger of her left hand, and half concealing a thin wedding-ring—and a star-shaped broach—one large cat's-eye with diamond rays, which fastened the lace handkerchief at her throat.

Christabel, quick to observe the woman whose existence had ruined her life, noted everything, from the small perfectly-shaped head—shaped for beauty rather than mental power—to the little arched foot in its pearl-coloured silk stocking, and grey satin slipper. For the first time in her life she beheld a woman whose chief business in this world was to look her loveliest, at all times and seasons, for friend or foe—for whom the perfection of costume was the study and delight of life—who lived and reigned by the divine right of beauty.

'Pray sit down!' said Miss Mayne, with a careless wave of her hand—so small—so delicate and fragile-looking under the lace ruffle; 'I am quite at a loss to guess to what I am indebted for the honour of this visit.'

She looked at her visitor scrutinizingly with those dark, too lustrous eyes. A hectic flush burned in her hollow cheeks. She had heard a good deal about this Miss Courtenay, of Mount Royal and Mayfair, and she came prepared to do battle.

For some moments Christabel was dumb. It was one thing to have come into this young lioness's den, and another thing to know what to say to the lioness. But the straightness and purity of the girl's purpose upheld her—and her courage hardly faltered.

'I have come to you, Miss Mayne, because I will not consent to be governed by common report. I want to know the truth—the whole truth—however bitter it may be for me—in order that I may know how to act.'

Miss Mayne had expected a much sharper mode of attack. She had been prepared to hear herself called scorpion—or viper—the pest of society—a form of address to which she would have been able to reply with a startling sharpness. But to be spoken to thus—gravely, gently, pleadingly, and with that sweet girlish face looking at her in unspeakable sorrow—was something for which she had not prepared herself.

'You speak to me like a lady—like a good woman,' she said, falteringly. 'What is it you want to know?'

'I have been told that Mr. Hamleigh—Angus Hamleigh—was once your lover. Is that true?'

'True as the stars in heaven—the stars by which we swore to love each other to the end of our lives—looking up at them, with our hands clasped, as we stood on the deck of the steamer between Dover and Calais. That was our marriage. I used to think that God saw it, and accepted it—just as if we had been in church: only it did not hold water, you see,' she added, with a cynical laugh, which ended in a hard little cough.

'He loved you dearly. I can see that by the lines that he wrote in your books. I ventured to look at them while I waited for you. Why did he not marry you?'

Stella Mayne shrugged her shoulders, and played with the soft lace of her *fichu*.

'It is not the fashion to marry a girl who dances in short petticoats, and lives in an attic," she answered. 'Perhaps such a girl might make a good wife, if a man had the courage to try the experiment. Such things have been done, I believe; but most men prefer the safer course. If I had been clever, I daresay Mr. Hamleigh would have married me; but I was an ignorant little fool—and when he came across my path he seemed like an angel of light. I simply worshipped him. You've no idea how innocent I was in those days. Not a carefully educated, lady-like innocence, like yours, don't you know, but absolute ignorance. I didn't know any wrong; but then I didn't know any right. You see I am quite candid with you.'

'I thank you with all my heart for your truthfulness. Everything—for you, for me, for Angus—depends upon our perfect truthfulness. I want to do what is best—what is wisest—what is right—not for myself only, but for Angus, for you.'

Those lovely liquid eyes looked at her incredulously.

'What,' cried Stella Mayne, with her mocking little laugh—a musical little laugh trained for comedy, and unconsciously artificial—'do you mean to tell me that you care a straw what becomes of me—that it matters to you whether I die in the gutter where I was born, or pitch myself into the Regent's Canal some night when I have a fit of the blue devils?'

'I care very much what becomes of you. I should not be here if I did not wish to do what is best for you.'

'Then you come as my friend, and not as my enemy?' said Stella.

'Yes, I am here as your friend,' answered Christabel, with an effort.

The actress—a creature all impulse and emotion—fell on her knees at Miss Courtenay's feet, and pressed her lips upon the lady's gloved hand.

'How good you are,' she exclaimed—'how good—how good. I have read of such women—they swarm in the novels I get from Mudie—they and fiends. There's no middle distance. But I never believed in them. When the man brought me your card I thought you had come to blackguard me.'

Christabel shuddered at the coarse word, so out of harmony with that vellum-bound Shelley, and all the graciousness of Miss Mayne's surroundings.

'Forgive me,' said Stella, seeing her disgust. 'I am horribly vulgar. I never was like that while—while Angus cared for me.'

'Why did he leave off caring for you?' asked Christabel, looking gravely down at the lovely upturned face, so exquisite in its fragile sensitive beauty.

Now Stella Mayne was one of those complex creatures, quite out of the range of a truthful woman's understanding—a creature who could be candour itself—could gush and prattle with the innocent expansiveness of a child, so long as there was nothing she particularly desired to conceal—yet who could lie with the same sweet air of child-like simplicity when it served her purpose—lie with the calm stolidity, the invincible assurance, of an untruthful child. She did not answer Christabel's question immediately, but looked at her thoughfully for a few seconds, wondering how much of her history this young lady knew, and to what extent lying might serve. She had slipped from her knees to a sitting position on the Persian hearthrug, her thin, semi-transparent hands clasped upon her knee, the triple circlet of gems flashing in the low sunlight.

'Why did we part?' she asked, shrugging her shoulders. 'I hardly know. Temper, I suppose. He has not too good a temper, and I—well, I am a demon when I am ill—and I am often ill.'

'You keep his portrait on your table,' said Christabel.

'Keep it? Yes—and round my neck,' answered Stella, jerking a gold locket out of her loose gown, and opening it to show the miniature inside. 'I have worn his picture against my heart ever since he gave it me—during our first Italian tour. I shall wear it so when I am dead. Yes—when he is married, and happy with you, and I am lying in my grave in Hendon Churchyard. Do you know I have bought and paid for my grave?'

'Why did you do that?'

'Because I wanted to make sure of not being buried in a cemetery—a city of the dead—streets and squares and alleys of gravestones. I have chosen a spot under a great spreading cedar, in a churchyard that might be a hundred miles from London—and yet it is quite near here, and handy for those who will have to take me. I shall not give any one too much trouble. Perhaps, if you will let him, Angus may come to my funeral, and drop a bunch of violets on my coffin.'

'Why do you talk like that?'

'Because the end cannot be very far off. Do you think I look as if I should live to be a grandmother!'

The hectic bloom, the unnatural light in those lovely eyes, the transparent hands, and purple-tinted nails, did not, indeed, point to such a conclusion.

'If you are really ill why do you go on acting?' asked Christabel, gently. 'Surely the fatigue and excitement must be very bad for you.'

'I hardly know. The fatigue may be killing me, but the excitement is the only thing that keeps me alive. Besides, I must live—thirty pounds a week is a consideration.'

'But—you are not in want of money?' exclaimed Christabel. 'Mr. Hamleigh would never——'

'Leave me to starve,' interrupted Stella, hurriedly; 'no I have plenty of money. While—while we were happy—Mr. Hamleigh lavished his money upon me—he was always absurdly generous—and if I wanted money now I should have but to hold out my hand. I have never known the want of money since I left my attic—four and sixpence a week, with the use of the kitchen fire, to boil a kettle, or cook a chop—when my resources rose to a chop—it was oftener a bloater. Do you know, the other day, when I was dreadfully ill and they had been worrying me with invalid turtle, jellies, oysters, caviare, all kinds of loathsome daintinesses—and the doctor said I should die if I didn't eat—I thought perhaps I might get back the old appetite for bloater and bread and butter—I used to enjoy a bloater tea so in those old days—but it was no use—the very smell of the thing almost killed me—the whole house was poisoned with it.'

She prattled on, looking up at Christabel with a confiding smile. The visit had taken quite a pleasant turn. She had no idea that anything serious was to come of it. Her quondam lover's affianced wife had taken it into her head to come and see what kind of stuff Mr. Hamleigh's former idol was made of—that was all—and the lady's amiability was making the interview altogether agreeable.

Yet, in another moment, the pain and sorrow in Christabel's face showed her that there was something stronger than frivolous curiosity in the lady's mind.

'Pray be serious with me,' said Christabel. 'Remember that the welfare of three people depends upon my resolution in this matter. It would be easy for me to say—I will shut my eyes to the past: he has told me that he loves me—and I will believe him. But I will not do that. I will not live a life of suspicion and unrest, just for the sweet privilege of bearing him company, and being called by his name—dear as that thought is to me. No, it shall be all or nothing. If I cannot have his whole heart I will have none of it. You confess that you wear his picture next your heart. Do you still love him?'

'Yes—always—always—always,' answered the actress, fervently. This at least was no bold-faced lie—there was truth's divine accent here. 'There is no man like him on this earth.' And then in low impassioned tones she quoted those passionate lines of Mrs. Browning's:—

'There is no one beside thee, and no one above thee;
Thou standest alone as the nightingale sings;
And my words, that would praise thee, are impotent things.'

'And do you believe that he has quite left off loving you?'

'No,' answered the actress, looking up at her with flashing eyes. 'I don't believe it. I don't believe he could after all we have been to each other. It isn't in human nature to forget such love as ours.'

'And you believe—if he were free—if he had not engaged himself to me—perhaps hardly intending it—he would come back to you?'

'Yes, if he knew how ill I am—if he knew what the doctor says about me—I believe he would come back.'

'And marry you?' asked Christabel, deadly pale.

'That's as may be,' retorted the other, with her Parisian shrug.

Christabel stood up, and laid her clenched hand on the low draperied mantelpiece, almost as if she were laying it on an altar to give emphasis to an oath. 'Then he shall come back—then he shall marry you,' she said in a grave, earnest voice. 'I will rob no woman of her husband. I will doom no fellow-creature to life-long shame!'

'What,' cried Stella Mayne, with almost a shriek, 'you will give him up—for me!'

'Yes. He has never belonged to me as he has belonged to you—it is no shame for me to renounce him—grief and pain—yes, grief and pain unspeakable—but no disgrace. He has sinned, and he must atone for his sin. I will not be the impediment to your marriage.'

'But if you were to give him up he might not marry me: men are so difficult to manage,' faltered the actress, aghast at the idea of such a sacrifice, seeing the whole business in the light of circumstances unknown to Miss Courtenay.

'Not men with conscience and honour,' answered Christabel, with unshaken firmness. 'I feel very sure that if Mr. Hamleigh were free he would do what is right. It is only his engagement to me that hinders his making atonement to you. He has lived among worldly people who have never reminded him of his duty—who have blunted his finer feelings with their hideous worldliness—oh, I know how worldly women talk—as if there were neither hell nor heaven, only Belgravia and Mayfair—and no doubt worldly men are still worse. But he—he whom I have so loved and honoured—cannot be without honour and conscience He shall do what is just and right.'

She looked almost inspired as she stood there with pale cheeks and kindling eyes, thinking far more of that broad principle of justice than of the fragile emotional creature trembling before her. This comes of feeding a girl's mind with Shakespeare and Bacon, Carlyle and Plato, to say nothing of that still broader and safer guide, the Gospel.

Just then there was the sound of footsteps approaching the door—a measured masculine footfall. The emotional creature flew to the door, opened it, murmured a few words to some person without, and closed it, but not before a whiff of Latakia had been wafted into the flower-scented room. The footsteps moved away in another direction, and Christabel was much too absorbed to notice that faint breath of tobacco.

'There's not the least use in your giving him up,' said Stella, resolutely: 'he would never marry me. You don't know him as well as I do.'

'Do I not? I have lived only to study his character for the best part of a year. I know he will do what is just.'

Stella Mayne suddenly clasped her hands before her face and sobbed aloud.

'Oh, if I were only good and innocent like you!' she cried, piteously; 'how I detest myself as I stand here before you!—how loathsome—how hateful I am!'

'No, no,' murmured Christabel, soothingly, 'you are not hateful: it is only impenitent sin that is hateful. You were led into wrong-doing because you were ignorant of right—there was no one to teach you—no one to uphold you. And he who tempted you is in duty bound to make amends. Trust me—trust me—it is better for my peace as well as for yours that he should do his duty. And now good-bye—I have stayed too long already.'

Again Stella Mayne fell on her knees and clasped this divine visitant's hand. It seemed to this weak yet fervid soul almost as if some angel guest had crossed her threshold. Christabel stooped and would have kissed the actress's forehead.

'No,' she cried, histerically, 'don't kiss me—don't—you don't know. I should feel like Judas.'

'Good-bye, then. Trust me.' And so they parted.

A tall man, with an iron-grey moustache and a soldier-like bearing, came out of a little study, cigarette in hand, as the outer door closed on Christabel. 'Who the deuce is that thoroughbred-looking girl?' asked this gentleman. 'Have you got some of the neighbouring swells to call upon you, at last? Why, what's the row, Fishky, you've been crying?'

Fishky was the stage-carpenters', dressers', and supernumeraries' pronunciation of the character which Miss Mayne acted nightly, and had been sportively adopted by her intimates as a pet name for herself.

'That lady is Miss Courtenay.'

'The lady Hamleigh is going to marry? What the devil is she doing in this *galère?* I hope she hasn't been making herself unpleasant?'

'She is an angel.'

'With all my heart. Hamleigh is very welcome to her, so long as he leaves me my dear little demon,' answered the soldier, smiling down from his altitude of six feet two at the sylph-like form in the Watteau gown.

'Oh, how I wish I had never seen your face,' said Stella: 'I should be almost a good woman, if there were no such person as you in the world.'

CHAPTER X.

'LET ME AND MY PASSIONATE LOVE GO BY.'

THAT second week of July was not altogether peerless weather. It contained within the brief span of its seven days one of those sudden and withering changes which try humanity more than the hardest winter, with which every Transatlantic weather-prophet threatened our island. The sultry heat of a tropical Tuesday was followed by the blighting east wind of a chilly Wednesday; and in the teeth of that keen east wind, blowing across the German Ocean, and gathering force among the Pentlands, Angus Hamleigh set forth from the cosy shelter of Hillside, upon a long day's salmon fishing.

His old kinswoman's health had considerably improved since his arrival; but she was not yet so entirely restored to her normal condition as to be willing that he should go back to London. She pleaded with him for a few days more, and in order that the days should not hang heavily on his hands, she urged him to make the most of his Scottish holiday by enjoying a day or two's salmon fishing. The first floods, which did not usually begin till August, had already swollen the river, and the grilse and early autumn salmon were running up; according to Donald, the handy man who helped in the gardens, and who was a first-rate fisherman.

'There's all your ain tackle upstairs in one o' the presses,' said the old lady ; 'ye'll just find it ready to your hand.'

The offer was tempting—Angus had found the long summer days pass but slowly in house and garden—albeit there was a library of good old classics. He so longed to be hastening back to Christabel—found the hours so empty and joyless without her. He was an ardent fisherman—loving that leisurely face-to-face contemplation of Nature which goes with rod and line. The huntsman sees the landscape flash past him like a dream of grey wintry beauty—it is no more to him than a picture in a gallery—he has rarely time to feel Nature's tranquil charms. Even when he must needs stand still for a while, he is devoured by impatience to be scampering off again, and to see the world in motion. But the angler has leisure to steep himself in the atmosphere of hill and streamlet—to take Nature's colours into his soul. Every angler ought to blossom into a landscape painter. But this salmon fishing was not altogether a dreamy and contemplative business. Quickness, presence of mind, and energetic action were needed at some stages of the sport. The moment came when Angus found his rod bending under the weight of a magnificent salmon, and when it seemed a toss up between landing his fish and being dragged under water by him.

'Jump in,' cried Donald, excitedly, when the angler's line was nearly expended, 'it's only up to your neck.' So Angus jumped in, and followed the lightning-swift rush of the salmon down stream, and then, turning him after some difficulty, had to follow his prey up stream again, back to the original pool, where he captured him, and broke the top of his eighteen-foot rod.

Angus clad himself thinly, because the almanack told him it was summer—he walked far and fast—overheated himself—waded for hours knee-deep in the river—his fishing-boots of three seasons ago far from watertight—ate nothing all day—and went back to Hillside at dusk, carrying the seeds of pneumonia under his oilskin jacket. Next day he contrived to crawl about the gardens, reading 'Burton' in an idle desultory way that suited so desultory a book, longing for a letter from Christabel, and sorely tired of his Scottish seclusion. On the day after he was laid up with a sharp attack of inflammation of the lungs, attended by his aunt's experienced old doctor—a shrewd hard-headed Scotchman, contemporary with Simpson, Sibson, Fergusson—all the brightest lights in the Caledonian galaxy—and nursed by one of his aunt's old servants.

While he was in this condition there came a letter from Christabel, a long letter, which he unfolded with eager trembling hands, looking for joy and comfort in its pages. But, as he read, his pallid cheek flushed with angry feverish carmine, and his short hard breathing grew shorter and harder.

Yet the letter expressed only tenderness. In tenderest words his betrothed reminded him of past wrong-doing, and urged upon him the duty of atonement. If this girl whom he had so passionately loved a little while ago was from society's standpoint unworthy to be his wife—it was he who had made her unworthiness—he who alone could redeem her from absolute shame and disgrace. 'All the world knows that you wronged her, let all the world know that you are glad to make such poor amends as may be made for that wrong,' wrote Christabel. 'I forgive you all the sorrow you have brought upon me: it was in a great measure my own fault. I was too eager to link my life with yours. I almost thrust myself upon you. I will revere and honour you all the days of my life, if you will do right in this hard crisis of our fate. Knowing what I know I could never be happy as your wife: my soul would be wrung with jealous fears; I should never feel secure of your love; my life would be one long self-torment. It is with this conviction that I tell you our engagement is ended, Angus, loving you with all my heart. I have not come hurriedly to this resolution. It is not of anybody's prompting. I have prayed to my God for guidance. I have questioned my own heart, and I believe that I have decided wisely and well. And so farewell, dear love. May God and your conscience inspire you to do right.

'Your ever constant friend,

'CHRISTABEL COURTENAY.'

Angus Hamleigh's first impulse was anger. Then came a softer feeling, and he saw all the nobleness of the womanly instinct that had prompted this letter: a good woman's profound pity for a fallen sister; an innocent woman's readiness to see only the poetical aspect of a guilty love; an unselfish woman's desire that right should be done, at any cost to herself.

'God bless her!' he murmured, and kissed the letter before he laid it under his pillow.

His next thought was to telegraph immediately to Christabel. He asked his nurse to bring him a telegraph form and a pencil, and with a shaking hand began to write:—

'No! a thousand times no. I owe no allegiance to any one but to you. There can be no question of broken faith with the person of whom you write. I hold you to your promise.'

Scarcely had his feeble fingers scrawled the lines than he tore up the paper.

'I will see the doctor first,' he thought. 'Am I a man to claim the fulfilment of a bright girl's promise of marriage? No, I'll get the doctor's verdict before I send her a word.'

When the old family practitioner had finished his soundings and questionings, Angus asked him to stop for a few minutes longer.

'You say I'm better this afternoon, and that you'll get me over this bout,' he said, 'and I believe you. But I want you to go a little further and tell me what you think of my case from a general point of view.'

'Humph,' muttered the doctor, 'it isn't easy to say what proportion of your seemptoms may be temporary, and what pairmenent; but ye've a vairy shabby pair of lungs at this praisent writing. What's your family heestory?'

'My father died of consumption at thirty.'

'Humph! ainy other relative?'

'My aunt, a girl of nineteen; my father's mother, at seven-and-twenty.'

'Dear, dear, that's no vairy lively retrospaict. Is this your fairst attack of heemorrage?'

'Not by three or four.'

The good old doctor shook his head.

'Ye'll need to take extreme care of yourself,' he said: 'and ye'll no be for spending much of your life in thees country. Ye might do vairy weel in September and October at Rothsay or in the Isle of Arran, but I'd recommaind ye to winter in the South.'

'Do you think I shall be a long-lived man?'

'My dear sir, that'll depend on care and circumstances beyond human foresight. I couldn't conscientiously recommaind your life to an Insurance Office.'

'Do you think that a man in my condition is justified in marrying?'

'Do ye want a plain answer?'

'The plainest that you can give me.'

'Then I tell you frankly that I think the marriage of a man with a marked consumptive tendency, like yours, is a crime—a crying sin, which is inexcusable in the face of modern science and modern enlightenment, and our advanced knowledge of the mainsprings of life and death. What, sir, can it be less than a crime to bring into this world children burdened with an hereditary curse, destined to a heritage of weakness and pain—bright young minds fettered by diseased bodies—born to perish untimely? Mr. Hamleigh, did ye ever read a book called "Ecce Homo?"'

'Yes, it is a book of books. I know it by heart.'

'Then ye'll may be remaimber the writer's summing up of practical Chreestianity as a seestem of ethics which in its ultimate perfection will result in the happiness of the human race—even that last enemy, Death, if not subdued, may be made to keep his distance, seemply by a due observance of natural laws—by an unselfish forethought and regard in each member of the human species for the welfare of the multitude. The man who becomes the father of a race of puny children can be no friend to humanity. He predooms future suffering to the innocent by a reckless indulgence of his own inclination in the present.'

'Yes, I believe you are right,' said Angus, with a despairing sigh. 'It seems a hard thing for a man who loves, and is beloved by, the sweetest among women, to forego even for a few brief years of perfect bliss, and go down lonely to the grave—to accept this doctrine of renunciation, and count himself as one dead in life. Yet a year ago I told myself pretty much what you have told me to-day. I was tempted from my resolve by a woman's loving devotion—and now—a crucial point has come—and I must decide whether to marry or not.'

'If you love humanity better than you love yourself, ye'll die a bachelor,' said the Scotchman, gravely, but with infinite pity in his shrewd old face; 'ye've asked me for the truth, and I've geeven it ye. Truth is often hard.'

Angus gave his thin hot hand to the doctor in token of friendly feeling, and then silently turned his face to the wall, whereupon the doctor gently patted him upon the shoulder and left him.

Yes, it was hard. In the bright spring time, his health wondrously restored by that quiet restful winter on the shores of the Mediterranean, Angus had almost believed that he had given his enemy the slip—that Death's dominion over him was henceforth to be no more than over the common ruck of humanity, who, knowing not when or how the fatal lot may fall from the urn, drop into a habit of considering themselves immortal, and death a calamity of which one reads in the newspapers with only a kindly interest in other people's mortality. All through the gay London season he had been so utterly happy, so wonderfully well, that the insidious disease, which had declared itself in the past by so many unmistakable symptoms, seemed to have relaxed its grip upon him. He began to have faith in an advanced medical science—the power to cure maladies hitherto considered incurable. That long interval of languid empty days and nights of placid sleep—the heavy sweetness of southern air breathing over the fields of orange flowers and violets, February roses and carnations, had brought strength and healing. The foe had been baffled by the new care which his victim had taken of an existence that had suddenly become precious.

This was the hope that had buoyed up Angus Hamleigh's spirits all through the happy spring-time and summer which he had spent in the company of his betrothed. He had seen the physician who less than a year before had pronounced his sentence of doom, and the famous physician, taking the thing in the light-hearted way of a man for whom humanity is a collection of 'cases,' was jocose and congratulatory, full of wonder at his patient's restoration, and taking credit to himself for having recommended Hyères. And now the enemy had him by the throat. The foe, no longer insidiously hinting at his deadly meaning, held him in the fierce grip of pain and fever. Such an attack as this, following upon one summer day's imprudence, showed but too plainly by how frail a tie he clung to life—how brief and how prone to malady must be the remnant of his days.

Before the post went out he re-read Christabel's letter, smiling mournfully as he read.

'Poor child!' he murmured to himself, 'God bless her for her innocence—God bless her for her unselfish desire to do right. If she only knew the truth—but, better that she should be spared the knowledge of evil. What good end would it serve if I were to enter upon painful explanations?'

He had himself propped up with pillows, and wrote, in a hand which he strove to keep from shaking, the following lines:—

'Dearest! I accept your decree: not for the reasons which you allege, which are no reasons; but for other motives which it would pain me too much to explain. I have loved you, I do love you, better than my own joy or comfort, better than my own life: and it is simply and wholly on that account I can resign myself to say, let us in the future be friends—and friends only.

'Your ever affectionate

'ANGUS HAMLEIGH.'

He was so much better next day as to be able to sit up for an hour or two in the afternoon; and during that time he wrote at length to Mrs. Tregonell, telling her of his illness, and of his conversation with the Scotch doctor, and the decision at which he had arrived on the strength of that medical opinion, and leaving her at liberty to tell Christabel as much, or as little of this, as she thought fit.

'I know you will do what is best for my darling's happiness,' he said. 'If I did not believe this renunciation a sacred duty, and the only means of saving her from infinite pain in the future, nothing that she or even you could say about my past frolics would induce me to renounce her. I would fight that question to the uttermost. But the other fatal fact is not to be faced, except by a blind and cowardly selfishness which I dare not practise.'

After this day, the invalid mended slowly, and old Miss MacPherson, his aunt, being soon quite restored, Mr. Hamleigh telegraphed to his valet to bring books and other necessaries from his chambers in the Albany, and to meet him in the Isle of Arran, where he meant to vegetate for the next month or two, chartering a yacht of some kind, and living half on land and half on sea.

CHAPTER XI.

'ALAS FOR ME THEN, MY GOOD DAYS ARE DONE.'

Angus Hamleigh's letter came upon Christabel like a torrent of cold water, as if that bright silvery arc which pierces the rock at St. Nectan's Kieve had struck upon her heart with its icy stream, and chilled it into stone. All through that long summer day upon which her letter must arrive at Hillside, she had lived in nervous expectation of a telegram expressing indignation, remonstrance, pleading, anger—a savage denial of her right to renounce her lover—to break her engagement. She had made up her mind in all good faith. She meant to go on to the bitter end, in the teeth of her lover's opposition, to complete her renunciation in favour of that frail creature who had so solemn a claim upon Angus Hamleigh's honour. She meant to fight this good fight—but she expected that the struggle would be hard. Oh, how long and dismal those summer hours seemed, which she spent in her own room, trying to read, trying to comfort herself with the saddest strains of classic melody, and always and through all listening for the telegraph boy's knock at the hall door, or for the sudden stopping of a hansom against the kerb, bringing home her lover to remonstrate in person, in defiance of all calculations of time and space.

There was no telegram. She had to wait nearly twenty-four hours for the slow transit of the mails from the high latitude of Inverness. And when she read Angus Hamleigh's letter—those few placid words which so quietly left her free to take her own way—her heart sank with a dull despair that was infinitely worse than the keen agonies of the last few days. The finality of that brief letter—the willingness to surrender her—the cold indifference, as it seemed, to her future fate—was the hardest blow of all. Too surely it confirmed all those humiliating doubts which had tortured her since her discovery of that wretched past. He had never really cared for her. It was she who had forced him into an avowal of affection by her unconscious revelation of love—she who, unmaidenly in her ignorance of life and mankind, had been the wooer rather than the wooed.

'Thank God that my pride and my duty helped me to decide,' she said to herself: 'what should I have done if I had married him and found out afterwards how weak a hold I had upon his heart—if he had told me one day that he had married me out of pity.'

Christabel told Mrs. Tregonell she had written to Mr. Hamleigh—she spoke of him only as Mr. Hamleigh now—and had received his reply, and that all was now over between them.

'I want you to return his presents for me, Auntie,' she said. 'They are too valuable to be sent to his chambers while he is away—the diamond necklace which he gave me on my birthday—just like that one I saw on the stage—I suppose he thinks all women have exactly the same ideas and fancies—the books too—I will put them all together for you to return.'

'He has given you a small library,' said Mrs. Tregonell. 'I will take the things in the carriage, and see that they are properly delivered. Don't be afraid, darling. You shall have no trouble about them. My own dear girl—how brave and good you are—how wise too. Yes, Belle, I am convinced that you have chosen wisely,' said the widow, with the glow of honest conviction, for the woof of self-interest is so cunningly interwoven with the warp of righteous feeling that very few of us can tell where the threads cross.

She drew her niece to her heart, and kissed her, and cried with her a little; and then said cheeringly, 'And now tell me, darling, what you would like to do? We have ever so many engagements for this week and the next fortnight—but you know that they have been made only for your sake, and if you don't care about them———'

'Care about them! Oh, Auntie, do you think I could go into society with this dull aching pain at my heart; I feel as if I should never care to see my fellow-creatures again—except yo and Jessie.'

And Leonard,' said the mother. 'Poor Leonard, who would go through fire and water for you.'

Christabel winced, feeling fretfully that she did not want any one to go through fire and water; a kind of acrobatic performance continually being volunteered by people who would hesitate at the loan of five pounds.

'Were shall we go, dear? Would you not like to go abroad for the Autumn—Switzerland, or Italy, for instance?' suggested Mrs. Tregonell, with an idea that three months on the Continent was a specific in such cases.

'No,' said Christabel, shudderingly, remembering how Angus and his frail first love had been happy together in Italy—oh, those books, those books, with their passionate record of past joys, those burning lines from Byron and Heine, which expressed such a world of feeling in ten syllables—'No, I would ever so much rather go back to Mount Royal.'

'My poor child, the place is so associated with Mr. Hamleigh. You would be thinking of him every hour of the day.'

'I shall do that anywhere.'

'Change of scene would be so much better for you—travelling—variety.'

Auntie, you are not strong enough to travel with comfort to yourself. I am not going to drag you about for a fanciful alleviation of my sorrow. The landscape may change but not the mind—I should think of—the past—just as much on Mont Blanc as on Willapark. No, dearest, let us go home; let me go back to the old, old life, as it was before I saw Mr. Hamleigh. Oh, what a child I was in those dear days, how happy, how happy.'

She burst into tears, melted by the memory of those placid days, the first tears she had shed since she received her lover's answer.

'And you will be happy again, dear. Don't you remember that passage I read to you in "The Caxtons" a few days ago, in which the wise tender-hearted father tells his son how small a space one great sorrow takes in a life, and how triumphantly the life soars on beyond it?'

'Yes, I remember; but I didn't believe him then, and I believe him still less now,' answered Christabel, doggedly.

Major Bree called that afternoon, and found Mrs. Tregonell alone in the drawing-room.

'Where is Belle?' he asked.

'She has gone for a long country ride—I insisted upon it.'

'You were quite right. She was looking as white as a ghost yesterday when I just caught a glimpse of her in the next room. She ran away like a guilty thing when she saw me. Well, has this cloud blown over? Is Hamleigh back?'

'No; Christabel's engagement is broken off. It has been a great blow, a severe trial; but now it is over I am glad; she never could have been happy with him.'

'How do you know that?' asked the Major, sharply.

'I judge him by his antecedents. What could be expected from a man who had led that kind of life—a man who so grossly deceived her?'

'Deceived her? Did she ask him if he had ever been in love with an actress? Did she or you ever interrogate him as to his past life? Why you did not even question me, or I should have been obliged to tell you all I knew of his relations with Miss Mayne.'

'You ought to have told me of your own accord. You should not have waited to be questioned,' said Mrs. Tregonell, indignantly.

'Why should I stir dirty water? Do you suppose that every man who makes a good husband and lives happily with his wife has been spotless up to the hour of his marriage? There is a *Sturm und Drang* period in every man's life, depend upon it. Far better that the tempest should rage before marriage than after.'

'I can't accept your philosophy, nor could Christabel. She took the business into her own hands, bravely, nobly. She has cancelled her engagement, and left Mr. Hamleigh free to make some kind of reparation to this actress person.'

'Reparation!—to Stella Mayne? Why don't you know that she is the mistress of Colonel Luscomb, who has ruined his social and professional prospects for her sake. Do you mean to say that old harpy who gave you your information about Angus did not give you the epilogue to the play?'

'Not a word,' said Mrs. Tregonell, considerably dashed by this intelligence. 'But I don't see that this fact alters the case—much. Christabel could never have been happy or at peace with a man who had once been devoted to a creature of that class.'

'Would you be surprised to hear that creatures of that class are flesh and blood; and that they love us and leave us, and cleave to us and forsake us, just like the women in society?' asked the Major, surveying her with mild scorn.

She was a good woman, no doubt, and acted honestly according to her lights; yet he was angry with her, believing that she had spoiled two lives by her incapacity to take a wide and liberal view of the human comedy.

CHAPTER XII.

'GRIEF A FIXED STAR, AND JOY A VANE THAT VEERS.'

THEY went back to the Cornish moors, and the good old manor-house on the hill above the sea; went back to the old life, just the same, in all outward seeming, as it had been before that fatal visit which had brought love and sorrow to Christabel. How lovely the hills looked in the soft summer light; how unspeakably fair the sea in all its glory of sapphire and emerald, and those deep garnet-coloured patches which show where the red sea-weed lurks below, with its pinnacles of rock and colonies of wild living creatures, gull and cormorant, basking in the sun. Little Boscastle, too, gay with the coming and going of many tourists, the merry music of the guard's horn, as the omnibus came jolting down the hill from Bodmin, or the coach wound up the hilt to Bude; busy with the bustle of tremendous experiments with rockets and life-saving apparatus in the soft July darkness; noisy with the lowing of cattle and plaintive tremolo of sheep in the market-place, and all the rude pleasures of a rural fair; alive with all manner of sound and movement, and having a general air of making money too fast for the capability of investment. The whole place was gorged with visitors—not the inn only, but every available bed-chamber at post-office, shop, and cottage was filled with humanity; and the half-dozen or so available pony-carriages were making the journey to Tintagel and back three times a day; while the patient investigators who tramped to St. Nectan's Kieve, without the faintest idea of who St. Nectan was, or what a kieve was, or what manner of local curiosity they were going to see, were legion; all coming back ravenous to the same cozy inn to elbow one another in friendly contiguity at the homely *table d'hôte,* in the yellow light of many candles.

Christabel avoided the village as much as possible during this gay season. She would have avoided it just as much had it been the dull season: the people she shrank from meeting were not the strange tourists, but the old gaffers and goodies who had known her all their lives—the 'uncles' and 'aunts'—(in Cornwall uncle and aunt are a kind of patriarchal title given to honoured age)—and who might consider themselves privileged to ask why her wedding was deferred, and when it was to be.

She went with Jessie on long lonely expeditions by sea and land. She had half a dozen old sailors who were her slaves, always ready to take her out in good weather, deeming it their highest privilege to obey so fair a captain, and one who always paid them handsomely for their labour. They went often to Trebarwith Sands, and sat there in some sheltered nook, working and reading at peace, resigned to a life that had lost all its brightness and colour.

'Do you know, Jessie, that I feel like an old maid of fifty?' said Belle on one of those rare occasions when she spoke of her own feelings. 'It seems to me as if it were ages since I made up my mind to live and die unmarried, and to make life, somehow or other, self-sufficing—as if Randie and I were both getting old and grey together. For he is ever so much greyer, the dear thing,' she said, laying her hand lovingly on the honest black head and grey muzzle. 'What a pity that dogs should grow old so soon, when we are so dependent on their love. Why are they not like elephants, in whose lives a decade hardly counts?'

'Oh, Belle, Belle, as if a beautiful woman of twenty could be dependent on a sheep-dog's affection—when she has all her life before her and all the world to choose from.'

'Perhaps you think I could change my lover as some people change their dogs,' said Belle, bitterly, 'be deeply attached to a colley this year and next year be just as devoted to a spaniel. My affections are not so easily transferable.'

Mrs. Tregonell had told her niece nothing of Angus Hamleigh's final letter to herself. He had given her freedom to communicate as much or as little of that letter as she liked to Christabel—and she had taken the utmost license, and had been altogether silent about it. What good could it do for Christabel to hear of his illness. The knowledge might inspire her to some wild quixotic act; she might insist upon devoting herself to him—to be his wife in order that she might be his nurse—and surely this would be to ruin her life without helping him to prolong his. The blow had fallen—the sharpest pain of this sudden sorrow had been suffered. Time and youth, and Leonard's faithful love would bring swift healing. 'How I loved and grieved for his father,' thought Mrs. Tregonell, 'Yet I survived his loss, and had a peaceful happy life with the best and kindest of men.'

A peaceful happy life, yes—the English matron's calm content in a handsome house and a well organized household—a good stable—velvet gowns—family diamonds—the world's respect. But that first passionate love of youth—the love that is eager for self-sacrifice, that would welcome beggary—the love which sees a lover independent of all surrounding circumstances, worshipping and deifying the man himself—that sacred flame had been for ever extinguished in Diana Champernowne's heart before she met burly broad-shouldered Squire Tregonell at the county ball.

She wrote to Leonard telling him what had happened, and that he might now count on the fulfilment of that hope which they both had cherished years ago. She asked him to come home at once, but to be careful that he approached Christabel only in a friendly and cousinly character, until there had been ample time for these new wounds to heal.

'She bears her trouble beautifully, and is all goodness and devotion to me—for I have been weak and ailing ever since I came from London—but I know the trial is very hard for her. The house would be more cheerful if you were at home. You might ask one or two of your Oxford friends. No one goes into the billiard-room now. Mount Royal is as quiet as a prison. If you do not come soon, dear boy, I think we shall die of melancholy.'

Mr. Tregonell did not put himself out of the way to comply with his loving mother's request. By the time the widow's letter reached him he had made his plans for the winter, and was not disposed to set them aside in order to oblige a lady who was only a necessary detail in his life. A man must needs have a mother; and, as mothers go, Mrs. Tregonell had been harmless and inoffensive; but she was not the kind of person for whom Leonard would throw over elaborate sporting arrangements, hired guides, horses, carts, and all the paraphernalia needful for Red River explorations. As for Christabel, Mr. Tregonell had not forgiven her for having set another man in the place which he, her cousin and boyish loyish lover in a rough tryannical way, had long made up his mind to occupy. The fact that she had broken with the man was a redeeming feature in the case; but he was not going into raptures about it; nor was he disposed to return to Mount Royal while she was still moping and regretting the discarded lover.

'Let her get over the doldrums, and then she and I may be friends again,' said Leonard to his boon companion, Jack Vandeleur, not a friend of his University days, but an acquaintance picked up on board a Cunard steamer—son of a half-pay naval captain, a man who had begun life in a line regiment, fought in Afghanistan, sold out, and lived by his wits and upon his friends for the last five years. He had made himself so useful to Mr. Tregonell by his superior experience as a traveller, his pluck and knowledge of all kinds of sport, that he had been able to live at free quarters with that gentleman from an early stage of their acquaintance.

Thus it was that Christabel was allowed to end the year in quietness and peace. Every one was tender and gentle with her, knowing how keenly she must have suffered. There was much disappointment among her country friends at the sorry ending of her engagement; more especially among those who had been in London during the season, and had seen the lovely Cornish *débutante* in her brief day of gladness. No one hinted a question to Christabel herself. The subject of marrying and giving in marriage was judiciously avoided in her presence. But Mrs. Tregonell had been questioned, and had explained briefly that certain painful revelations concerning Mr. Hamleigh's antecedents had constrained Christabel to give him up. Every one said it was a pity. Poor Miss Courtenay looked ill and unhappy. Surely it would have been wiser to waive all question of antecedents, and to trust to that sweet girl's influence for keeping Mr. Hamleigh straight in the future. 'Antecedents, indeed,' exclaimed a strong-minded matron, with five marriageable daughters. 'It is all very well for a young woman like Miss Courtenay—an only child, with fifteen hundred a year in her own right—to make a fuss about a young man's antecedents. But what would become of my five girls if I were to look at things so closely.' Christabel looked at the first column of the *Times* supplement daily to see if there were the advertisement of Angus Hamleigh's marriage with Stella Mayne. She was quite prepared to read such an announcement. Surely, now that she had set him free, he would make this act of atonement, he, in all whose sentiments she had perceived so nice a sense of honour. But no such advertisement appeared. It was possible, however, that the marriage had taken place without any public notification. Mr. Hamleigh might not care to call the world to witness his reparation. She prayed for him daily and nightly, praying that he might be led to do that which was best for his soul's welfare—for his peace here and hereafter—praying that his days, whether few or many, should be made happy.

There were times when that delicate reticence which made Angus Hamleigh's name a forbidden sound upon the lips of her friends, was a source of keenest pain to Christabel. It would have been painful to her to hear that name lightly spoken, no doubt; but this dull dead silence was worse. One day it flashed upon her that if he were to die nobody would tell her of his death. Kindred and friends would conspire to keep her uninformed. After this she read the list of deaths in the *Times* as eagerly as she read the marriages, but with an agony of fear lest that name, if written in fire, should leap out upon the page.

At last this painful sense of uncertainty as to the fate of one who, a few months ago, had been a part of her life, became unendurable. Pride withheld her from questioning her aunt or Jessie. She shrank from seeming small and mean in the sight of her own sex. She had made her sacrifice of her own accord, and there was a poverty of character in not being able to maintain the same Spartan courage to the end. But from Major Bree, the friend and playfellow of her childhood, the indulgent companion of her youth, she could better bear to accept pity—so, one mild afternoon in the beginning of October, when the Major dropped in at his usual hour for tea and gossip, she took him to see the chrysanthemums, in a house on the further side of the lawn; and here, having assured herself there was no gardener within hearing, she took courage to question him.

'Uncle Oliver,' she began, falteringly, trifling with the fringed petals of a snowy blossom, 'I want to ask you something.'

'My dear, I think you must know that there is nothing in the world I would not do for you.'

'I am sure of that; but this is not very difficult. It is only to answer one or two questions. Every one here is very good to me—but they make one mistake: they think because I have broken for ever—with—Mr. Hamleigh, that it can do me no good to know anything about him—that I can go on living and being happy, while I am as ignorant of his fate as if we were inhabitants of different planets. But they forget that after having been all the world to me he cannot all at once become nothing. I have still some faint interest in his fate. It hurts me like an actual pain not to know whether he is alive or dead,' she said, with a sudden sob.

'My poor pet!' murmured the Major, taking her hand in both his own. 'Have you heard nothing about him since you left London?'

'Not one word. People make believe that there was never any such person in this world.'

'They think it wiser to do so, in the hope you will forget him.'

'They might as well hope that I shall become a blackamoor,' said Christabel, scornfully. 'You have more knowledge of the human heart, Uncle Oliver—and you must know that I shall always remember him. Tell me the truth about him just this once, and I will not mention his name again for a long, long time. He is not dead, is he?'

'Dead! no, Belle. What put such a notion into your head?'

'Silence always seems like death; and every one has kept silence about him.'

'He was ill while he was in Scotland—a touch of the old complaint. I heard of him at Plymouth the other day, from a yachting man who met him in the Isle of Arran, after his illness—he was all right then, I believe.'

'Ill—and I never knew of it—dangerously ill, perhaps.'

'I don't suppose it was anything very bad. He had been yachting when my Plymouth acquaintance met him.'

'He has not married—that person,' faltered Christabel.

'What person?'

'Miss Mayne.'

'Good heavens, no, my dear—nor ever will.'

'But he ought—it is his duty.'

'My dear child, that is a question which I can hardly discuss with you. But I may tell you, at least, that there is an all-sufficient reason why Angus Hamleigh would never make such an idiot of himself.'

'Do you mean that she could never be worthy of him—that she is irredeemably wicked?' asked Christabel.

'She is not good enough to be any honest man's wife.'

'And yet she did not seem wicked; she spoke of him with such intense feeling.'

'She seemed—she spoke!' repeated the Major aghast. 'Do you mean to tell me that you have seen—that you have conversed with her?'

'Yes: when my aunt told me the story which she heard from Lady Cumberbridge I could not bring myself to believe it until it was confirmed by Miss Mayne's own lips. I made up my mind that I would go and see her—and I went. Was that wrong?'

'Very wrong. You ought not to have gone near her. If you wanted to know more than common rumour could tell you, you should have sent me—your friend. It was a most unwise act.'

'I thought I was doing my duty. I think so still,' said Christabel, looking at him with frank steadfast eyes. 'We are both women. If we stand far apart it is because Providence has given me many blessings which were withheld from her. It is Mr. Hamleigh's duty to repair the wrong he has done. If he does not he must be answerable to his Maker for the eternal ruin of a soul.'

'I tell you again, my dear, that you do not understand the circumstances, and cannot fairly judge the case. You would have done better to take an old soldier's advice before you let the venomous gossip of that malevolent harridan spoil two lives.'

'I did not allow myself to be governed by Lady Cumberbridge's gossip, Uncle Oliver. I took nothing for granted. It was not till I had heard the truth from Miss Mayne's lips that I took any decisive step. Mr. Hamleigh accepted my resolve so readily that I can but think it was a welcome release.'

'My dear, you went to a queer shop for truth. If you had only known your way about town a little better you would have thought twice before you sacrificed your own happiness in the hope of making Miss Mayne a respectable member of society. But what's done cannot be undone. There's no use in crying over spilt milk. I daresay you and Mr. Hamleigh will meet again and make up your quarrel before we are a year older. In the meantime don't fret, Belle—and don't be afraid that he will ever marry any one but you. I'll be answerable for his constancy.'

The anniversary of Christabel's betrothal came round, St. Luke's Day—a grey October day—with a drizzling West-country rain. She went to church alone, for her aunt was far from well, and Miss Bridgeman stayed at home to keep the invalid company—to read to her and cheer her through the long dull morning. Perhaps they both felt that Christabel would rather be alone on this day. She put on her waterproof coat, took her dog with her, and started upon that wild lonely walk to the church in the hollow of the hills. Randie was a beast of perfect manners, and would lie quietly in the porch all through the service, waiting for his mistress.

She knelt alone just where they two had knelt together. There was the humble altar before which they were to have been married; the rustic shrine of which they had so often spoken as the fittest place for a loving union—fuller of tender meaning than splendid St. George's, with its fine oaken panelling, painted windows, and Hogarthian architecture. Never at that altar nor at any other were they two to kneel. A little year had held all—her hopes and fears—her triumphant love—joy beyond expression—and sadness too deep for tears. She went over the record as she knelt in the familiar pew—her lips moving automatically, repeating the responses—her eyes fixed and tearless.

Then when the service was over she went slowly wandering in and out among the graves, looking at the grey slate tablets, with the names of those whom she had known in life, all at rest now—old people who had suffered long and patiently before they died—a fair young girl who had died of consumption, and whose sufferings had been sharper than those of age—a sailor who had gone out to a ship with a rope one desperate night, and had given his life to save others—all at rest now.

There was no grave being dug to-day. She remembered how, as she and Angus lingered at the gate, the dull sound of the earth thrown from the gravedigger's spade had mixed with the joyous song of the robin perched on the gate. To-day there was neither gravedigger nor robin—only the soft drip, drip of the rain on dock and thistle, fern and briony. She had the churchyard all to herself, the dog following her about meekly, crawling over grassy mounds, winding in and out among the long wet grass.

'When I die, if you have the ordering of my funeral, be sure I am buried in Minster Churchyard.'

That is what Angus had said to her one summer morning, when they were sitting on the Maidenhead coach; and even West-End London, and a London Park, looked lovely in the clear June light. Little chance now that she would be called upon to choose his resting-place—that her hands would fold his in their last meek attitude of submission to the universal conqueror.

'Perhaps he will spend his life in Italy, where no one will know his wife's history,' thought Christabel, always believing, in spite of Major Bree's protest, that her old lover would sooner or later make the one possible atonement for an old sin Nobody except the Major had told her how little the lady deserved that such atonement should be made. It was Mrs. Tregonell's theory that a well-brought up young woman should be left in darkest ignorance of the darker problems of life.

Christabel walked across the hill, and down by narrow winding ways into the valley, where the river, swollen and turbid after the late rains, tumbled noisily over rock and root and bent the long reeds upon its margin. She crossed the narrow footbridge, and went slowly through the level fields between two long lines of hills—a gorge through which, in bleak weather, the winds blew fiercely. There was another hill to ascend before she reached the field that led to Pentargon Bay —half a mile or so of high road between steep banks and tall unkempt hedges. How short and easy to climb that hill had seemed to her in Angus Hamleigh's company! Now she walked wearily and slowly under the softly falling rain, wondering where he was, and whether he remembered this day.

She could recall every word that he had spoken, and the memory was full of pain; for in the light of her new knowledge it seemed to her that all he had said about his early doom had been an argument intended to demonstrate to her why he dared not and must not ask her to be his wife—an apology and an explanation as it were—and this apology, this explanation had been made necessary by her own foolishness—by that fatal forgetfulness of self-respect which had allowed her love to reveal itself. And yet, surely that look of rapture which had shone in his eyes as he clasped her to his heart, as he accepted the dedication of her young life, those tender tones, and all the love that had come afterwards could not have been entirely falsehood.

'I cannot believe that he was a hypocrite,' she said, standing where they two had sat side by side in the sunlight of that lovely day, gazing at the grey sea, smooth as a lake under the low grey sky. 'I think he must have loved me—unwillingly, perhaps—but it was true love while it lasted. He gave his first and best love to that other—but he loved me too. If I had dared to believe him—to trust in my power to keep him. But no; that would have been to confirm him in wrong-doing. It was his duty to marry the girl he wronged.'

The thought that her sacrifice had been made to principle rather than to feeling sustained her in this hour as nothing else could have done. If she could only know where he was, and how he fared, and what he meant to do with his future life, she could be happier, she thought.

Luncheon was over when Christabel went back to Mount Royal; but as Mrs. Tregonell was too ill to take anything beyond a cup of beef tea in her own room, this fact was of no consequence. The mistress of Mount Royal had been declining visibly since her return to Cornwall; Mr. Treherne, the family doctor, told Christabel there was no cause for alarm, but he hinted also that her aunt was not likely to be a long-lived woman.

'I'm afraid she worries herself,' he said; 'she is too anxious about that scapegrace son of hers.'

'Leonard is very cruel,' answered Christabel; 'he lets weeks and even months go by without writing, and that makes his poor mother miserable. She is perpetually worrying herself about imaginary evils—storm and shipwreck, runaway horses, explosions on steamboats.'

'If she would but remember a vulgar adage, that "Nought is never in danger," muttered the doctor, with whom Leonard had been no favourite.

'And then she has frightful dreams about him,' said Christabel.

'My dear Miss Courtenay, I know all about it,' answered Mr. Treherne; 'your dear aunt is just in that comfortable position of life in which a woman must worry herself about something or other. "Man was born to trouble," don't you know, my dear? The people who haven't real cares are constrained to invent sham ones. Look at King Solomon—did you ever read any book that breathes such intense melancholy in every line as that little work of his called Ecclesiastes? Solomon was living in the lap of luxury when he wrote that little book, and very likely hadn't a trouble in this world. However, imaginary cares can kill as well as the hardest realities, so you must try to keep up your aunt's spirits, and at the same time be sure that she doesn't over-exert herself. She has a weak heart—what we call a tired heart.'

'Does that mean heart-disease?' faltered Christabel, with a despairing look.

'Well, my dear, it doesn't mean a healthy heart. It is not organic disease—nothing wrong with the valves—no fear of excruciating pains—but it's a rather risky condition of life, and needs care.'

'I will be careful,' murmured the girl, with white lips, as the awful shadow of a grief, hardly thought of till this moment, fell darkly across her joyless horizon.

Her aunt, her adopted mother—mother in all sweetest care and love and thoughtful culture—might too soon be taken from her. Then indeed, and then only, could she know what it was to be alone. Keenly, bitterly, she thought how little during the last dismal months she had valued that love—almost as old as her life—and how the loss of a newer love had made the world desolate for her, life without meaning or purpose. She remembered how little more than a year ago—before the coming of Angus Hamleigh—her aunt and she had been all the world to each other, that tender mother-love all sufficing to fill her life with interest and delight.

In the face of this new fear that sacred love resumed its old place in her mind. Not for an hour, not for a moment of the days to come, should her care or her affection slacken. Not for a moment should the image of him whom she had loved and renounced come between her and her duty to her aunt.

CHAPTER XIII.

'LOVE WILL HAVE HIS DAY.'

FROM this time Christabel brightened and grew more like her old self. Mrs. Tregonell told herself that the sharp sorrow was gradually wearing itself out. No girl with such happy surroundings as Christabel's could go on being unhappy for ever. Her own spirits improved with Christabel's increasing brightness, and the old house began to lose its dismal air. Until now the widow's conscience had been ill at ease—she had been perpetually arguing with herself that she had done right—trying to stifle doubts that continually renewed themselves. But now she told herself that the time of sorrow was past, and that her wisdom would be justified by its fruits. She had no suspicion that her niece was striving of set purpose to be cheerful—that these smiles and this bright girlish talk were the result of painful effort, duty triumphing over sorrow.

Mount Royal that winter seemed one of the brightest, most hospitable houses in the neighbourhood. There were no parties; Mrs. Tregonell's delicate health was a reason against that. But there was generally some one staying in the house—some nice girl, whose vivacious talk and whose new music helped to beguile the mother from sad thoughts about her absent son—from wearying doubts as to the fulfilment of her plans for the future. There were people coming and going; old friends driving twenty miles to luncheon, and sometimes persuaded to stay to dinner; nearer neighbours walking three miles or so to afternoon tea. The cheery rector of Trevalga and his family, friends of twenty years' standing, were frequent guests. Mrs. Tregonell was not allowed to excite herself, but she was never allowed to be dull. Christabel and Jessie watched her with unwavering attention—anticipating every wish, preventing every fatigue. A weak and tired heart might hold out for a long time under such tender treatment.

But early in March there came an unexpected trial, in the shape of a sudden and great joy. Leonard, who had never learnt the rudiments of forethought and consideration for others, drove up to the house one afternoon in an hired chaise from Launceston, just as twilight was creeping over the hills, and dashed unannounced into the room where his mother and the two girls were sitting at tea.

'Who is this?' gasped Mrs. Tregonell, starting up from her low easy chair, as the tall broad-shouldered man, bearded, bronzed, clad in a thick grey coat and big white muffler, stood before her; and then with a shriek she cried 'My son! My son!' and fell upon his breast.

When he placed her in a chair a minute later she was almost fainting, and it was some moments before she recovered speech. Christabel and Jessie thought the shock would have killed her.

'Oh, Leonard! how could you?' murmured Christabel, reproachfully.

'How could I do what?'

'Come home without one word of notice, knowing your mother's delicate health.'

'I thought it would be a pleasant surprise for her. Besides I hadn't made up my mind to come straight home till two o'clock to day. I had half a mind to take a week in town first, before I came to this God-forsaken hole. You stare at me as if I had no right to be here at all, Belle.'

'Leonard, my boy, my boy,' faltered the mother, with pale lips, looking up adoringly at the bearded face, so weather-beaten, so hardened and altered from the fresh lines of youth. 'If you knew how I have longed for this hour. I have had such fears. You have been in such perilous places—among savages—in all kinds of danger. Often and often I have dreamt that I saw you dead.

'Upon my soul, this is a lively welcome,' said Leonard.

'My dearest, I don't want to be dismal,' said Mrs. Tregonell, with a faint hysterical laugh. Her heart was beating tumultuously, the hands that clasped her son's were cold and damp. 'My soul is full of joy. How changed you are dear! You look as if you had gone through great hardships.'

'Life in the Rockies isn't all child's play, mother, but we've had a jolly time of it, on the whole. America is a magnificent country. I feel deuced sorry to come home—except for the pleasure of seeing you and Belle. Let's have a look at you Belle, and see if you are as much changed as I am. Step into the light, young lady.'

He drew her into the full broad light of a heaped-up wood and coal fire. There was very little daylight in the room. The tapestry curtains fell low over the heavily mullioned Tudor windows, and inside the tapestry there was a screen of soft muslin.

'I have not been shooting moose and skunk, or living in a tent,' said Christabel, with a forced laugh. She wanted to be amiable to her cousin—wished even to like him, but it went against the grain. She wondered if he had always been as hateful as this. 'You can't expect to find much difference in me after three years' vegetation in Cornwall.'

'But you've not been vegetating all the time, said Leonard, looking her over as coolly as if she had been a horse. 'You have had a season in London. I saw your name in some of the gossiping journals, when I was last at Montreal. You wore a pink gown at Sandown. You were one of the prettiest girls at the Royal Fancy fair. You wore white and tea roses at the Marlborough House garden party. You have been shining in high places, Mistress Belle. I hope it has not spoiled you for a country life.'

'I love the country better than ever. I can vouch for that.'

'And you have grown ever so much handsomer since I saw you last. I can vouch for that,' answered her cousin with his free and easy air. 'How d'ye do, Miss Bridgeman?' he said, holding out two fingers to his mother's companion, whose presence he had until this moment ignored.

Jessie remembered Thackeray's advice, and gave the squire one finger in return for his two.

'*You're* not altered,' he said, looking at her with a steady stare. 'You're the hard-wearing sort, warranted fast colour.'

'Give Leonard some tea, Jessie,' said Mrs. Tregonell. 'I'm sure you would like some tea?' looking lovingly at the tall figure, the hard handsome face.

'I'd rather have a brandy-and-soda,' answered Leonard, carelessly, 'but I don't mind a cup of tea presently, when I've been and had a look round the stables and kennels.'

'Oh, Leonard! surely not yet?' said Mrs. Tregonell.

'Not yet! Why, I've been in the house ten minutes, and you may suppose I want to know how my hunters have been getting on in the last three years, and whether the colt Nicholls bred is good for anything. I'll just take a hurried look round and be back again slick.'

Mrs. Tregonell sighed and submitted. What could she do but submit to a son who had had his own way and followed his own pleasure ever since he could run alone; nay, had roared and protested loudly at every attack upon his liberty when he was still in the invertebrate jelly-fish stage of existence, carried at full length in his nurse's arms, with his face turned to the ceiling, perpetually contemplating that flat white view of indoor existence which must needs have a depressing influence upon the meditations of infancy. The mothers of spirited youths have to fulfil their mission, which is for the most part submission.

'How well he looks!' she said, fondly, when the squire had hurried out of the room; 'and how he has broadened and filled out.'

Jessie Bridgeman thought within herself that he was quite broad enough before he went to America, and that this filling-out process had hardly improved him, but she held her peace.

'He looks very strong,' said Christabel. 'I could fancy Hercules just such a man. I wonder whether he has brought home any lions' hides, and if he will have one made into a shooting jacket. Dear, dearest Auntie,' she went on, kneeling by the widow's chair, 'I hope you are quite happy now. I hope your cup of bliss is full.'

'I am very happy, sweet one; but the cup is not full yet. I hope it may be before I die—full to overflowing, and that I shall be able to say, "Lord, let me depart in peace," with a glad and grateful heart.'

Leonard came back from the stables in a rather gloomy mood. His hunters did not look as well as he expected, and the new colt was weak and weedy. 'Nicholls ought to have known better than to breed such a thing, but I suppose he'd say, like the man in Tristram Shandy, that it wasn't his fault,' grumbled Mr. Tregonell, as he seated himself in front of the fire, with his feet on the brass fender. He wore clump-soled boots and a rough heather-mixture shooting suit, with knickerbockers and coarse stockings, and his whole aspect was 'sporting.' Christabel thought of some one else who had sat before the same hearth in the peaceful twilight hour, and wondered if the spiritual differences between these two men were as wide as those of manner and outward seeming. She recalled the exquisite refinement of that other man, the refinement of the man who is a born dandy, who, under the most adverse circumstances, compelled to wear old clothes and to defy fashion, would yet be always elegant and refined of aspect. She remembered that outward grace which seemed the natural indication of a poetical mind—a grace which never degenerated into effeminacy, a refinement which never approached the feeble or the lackadaisical.

Mr. Tregonell stretched his large limbs before the blaze, and made himself comfortable in the spacious plush-covered chair, throwing back his dark head upon a crewel anti-macassar, which was a work of art almost as worthy of notice as a water-colour painting, so exquisitely had the flowers been copied from Nature by the patient needlewoman.

'This is rather more comfortable than the Rockies,' he said, as he stirred his tea, with big broad hands, scratched and scarred with hard service. 'Mount Royal isn't half a bad place for two or three months in the year. But I suppose you mean to go to London after Easter? Now Belle has tasted blood she'll be all agog for a second plunge. Sandown will be uncommonly jolly this year.'

'No, we are not going to town this season.'

'Why not? Hard up—spent all the dollars?'

'No, but I don't think Belle would care about it.'

'That's bosh. Come, now, Belle, you want to go of course, said Mr. Tregonell, turning to his cousin.

'No, Leonard, that kind of thing is all very well for once in a lifetime. I suppose every woman wants to know what the great world is like—but one season must resemble another, I should think: just like Boscastle Fair, which I used to fancy so lovely when I was a child, till I began to understand that it was exactly the same every year, and that it was just possible for one to outgrow the idea of its delightfulness.'

'That isn't true about London though. There is always something new—new clubs, new theatres, new actors, new race-meetings, new horses, new people. I vote for May and June in Bolton Row.'

'I don't think your dear mother's health would be equal to London, this year, Leonard,' said Christabel, gravely.

She was angry with this beloved and only son for not having seen the change in his mother's appearance—for talking so loudly and so lightly, as if there were nothing to be thought of in life expect his own pleasure.

'What, old lady, are you under the weather?' he asked, turning to survey his mother with a critical air.

This was his American manner of inquiring after her health. Mrs. Tregonell, when the meaning of the phrase had been explained to her, confessed herself an invalid, for whom the placid monotony of rural life was much safer than the dissipation of a London season.

'Oh, very well,' said Leonard with a shrug; then you and Belle must stop at home and take care of each other—and I can have six weeks in London *en garçon*. It won't be worth while to open the house in Bolton Row—I'd rather stop at an hotel.'

'But you won't leave me directly after your return, Leonard?'

'No, no, of course not. Not till after Easter. Easter's three weeks ahead of us. You'll be tired enough of me by that time.'

'Tired of you! After three years' absence?"

'Well, you must have got accustomed to doing without me, don't you know,' said Leonard with charming frankness. 'When a man has been three years away he can't hurt his friends' feelings much if he dies abroad. They've learnt how easy it is to get along without him.'

'Leonard! how can you say such cruel things?' expostulated his mother, with tears in her eyes. The very mention of death, as among the possibilities of existence, scared her.

'There's nothing cruel in it, ma'am; it's only common sense.' answered Leonard. 'Three years. Well, it's a jolly long time, isn't it? and I dare say to you, in this sleepy hollow of a place, it seemed precious long. But for fellows who are knocking about the world—as Poker Vandeleur and I were—time spins by pretty fast, I can tell you. I'll hoist in some more sap—another cup of tea, if you please, Miss Bridgeman,' added Leonard, handing in his empty cup. 'It's uncommonly good stuff. Oh! here's old Randie—come here, Randie.'

Randie, clutched unceremoniously by the tail, and drawn over the earthrug, like any inanimate chattel, remonstrated with a growl and a snap. He had never been over-fond of the master of Mount Royal, and absence had not made his heart grow fonder.

'His temper hasn't improved,' muttered Leonard, pushing the dog away with his foot.

'His temper is always lovely when he's kindly treated,' said Christabel, making room for the dog in her low arm chair, whereupon Randie insinuated himself into that soft silken nest, and looked fondly up at his mistress with his honest brown eyes.

'You should let me give you a Pomeranian instead of that ungainly beast,' said Leonard.

'No, thanks. Never any other dog while Randie lives. Randie is a person, and he and I have a hundred ideas in common. I don't want a toy dog—a dog that is only meant for show.'

'Pomeranians are clever enough for anybody, and they are worth looking at. I wouldn't waste my affection upon an ugly dog any more than I would on an ugly woman.'

'Randie is handsome in my eyes,' said Christabel, caressing the sheep-dog's grey muzzle.

'I'm through,' said Mr. Tregonell, putting down his cup.

He affected Yankee phrases, and spoke with a Yankee twang. America and the Americans had suited him, 'down to the ground,' as he called it. Their decisive rapidity, that go-a-head spirit which charged life with a kind of mental electricity—made life ever so much better worth living than in the dull sleepy old world where every one was content with the existing condition of things, and only desired to retain present advantages. Leonard loved sport and adventure, action, variety. He was a tyrant, and yet a democrat. He was quite willing to live on familiar term with grooms and gamekeepers—but not on equal terms. He must always be master. As much good fellowship as they pleased—but they must all knuckle under to him. He had been the noisy young autocrat of the stable-yard and the saddle-room when he was still in Eton jackets. He lived on the easiest terms with the guides and assistants of his American travels, but he took care to make them feel that he was their employer, and, in his own language, 'the biggest boss they were ever likely to have to deal with.' He paid them lavishly, and gave himself the airs of a Prince—Prince Henry in the wild Falstaffian days, before the charge of a kingdom taught him to be grave, yet with but too little of Henry's gallant spirit and generous instincts.

Three years' travel, in Australia and America, had not exercised a refining influence upon Leonard Tregonell's character or manners. Blind as the mother's love might be, she had insight enough to perceive this, and she acknowledged the fact to herself sadly. There are travellers and travellers: some in whom a wild free life awakens the very spirit of poetry itself—whom unrestrained intercourse with Nature elevates to Nature's grander level—some whose mental power deepens and widens in the solitude of forest or mountain, whose noblest instincts are awakened by loneliness that seems to bring them nearer God. But Leonard Tregonell was not a traveller of this type. Away from the restraints of civilization—the conventional refinements and smoothings down of a rough character—his nature coarsened and hardened. His love of killing wild and beautiful things grew into a passion. He lived chiefly to hunt and to slay, and had no touch of pity for those gracious creatures which looked at their slaughterer reproachfully, with dim pathetic eyes—wide with a wild surprise at man's cruelty. Constant intercourse with men coarser and more ignorant than himself dragged him down little by little to a lower grade than he had been born to occupy. In all the time that he had been away he had hardly ever opened a book. Great books had been written. Poets, historians, philosophers, theologians had given the fruits of their meditations and their researches to the world, but never an hour had Mr. Tregonell devoted to the study of human progress, to the onward march of human thought. When he was within reach of newspapers he read them industriously, and learnt from a stray paragraph how some great scientific discovery in science, some brilliant success in art, had been the talk of the hour; but neither art nor science interested him. The only papers which he cared about were the sporting papers.

His travels for the most part had been in wild lonely regions, but even in the short intervals that he had spent in cities he had shunned all intellectual amusements. He had heard neither concerts nor lectures, and had only affected the lowest forms of dramatic art. Most of his nights had been spent in bar-rooms or groceries, playing faro, monte, poker, euchre, and falling in pleasantly with whatever might be the most popular form of gambling in that particular city.

And now he had come back to Mount Royal, having sown his wild oats, and improved himself mentally and physically, as it was supposed by the outside world, by extensive travel; and he was henceforward to reign in his father's place, a popular country gentleman, honourable and honoured, useful in his generation, a friend to rich and poor.

Nobody had any cause for complaint against him during the first few weeks after his return. If his manners were rough and coarse, his language larded with American slang, his conduct was unobjectionable. He was affectionate to his mother, attentive in his free and easy way to Christabel, civil to the old servants, and friendly to old friends. He made considerable alterations in the stables, bought and sold and swopped horses, engaged new underlings, acted in all out-of-door arrangements as if the place were entirely his own, albeit his mother's life-interest in the estate gave her the custody of everything. But his mother was too full of gladness at his return to object to anything that he did. She opened her purse-strings freely, although his tour had been a costly business. Her income had accumulated in the less expensive period of his boyhood, and she could afford to indulge his fancies.

He went about with Major Bree, looking up old acquaintances, riding over every acre of the estate—lands which stretched far away towards Launceston on one side, towards Bodmin on the other. He held forth largely to the Major on the pettiness and narrowness of an English landscape as compared with that vast continent in which the rivers are as seas and the forests rank and gloomy wildernesses reaching to the trackless and unknown. Sometimes Christabel was their companion in these long rides, mounted on the thoroughbred which Mrs. Tregonell gave her on that last too-happy birthday. The long rides in the sweet soft April air brought health and brightness back to her pale cheeks. She was so anxious to look well and happy for her aunt's sake, to cheer the widow's fading life; but, oh! the unutterable sadness of that ever-present thought of the aftertime, that unanswerable question as to what was to become of her own empty days when this dear friend was gone.

Happy as Leonard seemed at Mount Royal in the society of his mother and his cousin, he did not forego his idea of a month or so in London. He went up to town soon after Easter, took rooms at an hotel near the Haymarket, and gave himself up to a round of metropolitan pleasures under the guidance of Captain Vandeleur, who had made the initiation of provincial and inexperienced youth a kind of profession. He had a neat way of finding out exactly how much money a young man had to dispose of, present or contingent, and put him through it in the quickest possible time and at the pleasantest pace; but he knew by experience that Leonard had his own ideas about money, and was as keen as experience itself. He would pay the current rate for his pleasures, and no more; and he had a prudential horror of Jews, post-obits, and all engagements likely to damage his future enjoyment of his estate. He was fond of play, but he did not go in the way of losing large sums—'ponies' not 'monkies' were his favourite animals—and he did not care about playing against his chosen friend.

'I like to have you on my side, Poker,' he said amiably, when the captain proposed a devilled bone and a hand at écarté after the play. 'You're a good deal too clever for a comfortable antagonist. You play écarté with your other young friends, Poker, and I'll be your partner at whist.'

Captain Vandeleur, who by this time was tolerably familiar with the workings of his friend's mind, never again suggested those quiet encounters of skill which must inevitably have resulted to his advantage, had Leonard been weak enough to accept the challenge. To have pressed the question would have been to avow himself a sharper. He had won money from his friend at blind hookey; but then at blind hookey all men are equal—and Leonard had accepted the decree of fate; but he was not the kind of man to let another man get the better of him in a series of transactions. He was not brilliant, but he was shrewd and keen, and had long ago made up his mind to get fair value for his money. If he allowed Jack Vandeleur to travel at his expense, or dine and drink daily at his hotel, it was not because Leonard was weakly generous, but because Jack's company was worth the money. He would not have paid for a pint of wine for a man who was dull, or a bore. At Mount Royal, of course, he was obliged now and then to entertain bores. It was an incident in his position as a leading man in the county—but here in London he was free to please himself, and to give the cold shoulder to uncongenial acquaintance.

Gay as town was, Mr. Tregonell soon tired of it upon this particular occasion. After Epsom and Ascot his enjoyment began to wane. He had made a round of the theatres—he had dined and supped, and played a good many nights at those clubs which he and his friends most affected. He had spent three evenings watching a great billiard match, and he found that his thoughts went back to Mount Royal, and to those he had left there—to Christabel, who had been very kind and sweet to him since his home-coming; who had done much to make home delightful to him—riding with him, playing and singing to him, playing billiards with him, listening to his stories of travel—interested or seeming interested, in every detail of that wild free life. Leonard did not know that Christabel had done all this for her aunt's sake, in the endeavour to keep the prodigal at home, knowing how the mother's peace and gladness depended on the conduct of her son.

And now, in the midst of London dissipations, Leonard yearned for that girlish companionship. It was dull enough, no doubt, that calm and domestic life under the old roof-tree; but it had been pleasant to him, and he had not wearied of it half so quickly as of this fret and fume, and wear and tear of London amusements. Leonard began to think that his natural bent was towards domesticity, and that, as Belle's husband—there could be no doubt that she would accept him when the time came for asking her—he would shine as a very estimable character, just as his father had shone before him. He had questioned his mother searchingly as to Belle's engagement to Mr. Angus Hamleigh, and was inclined to be retrospectively jealous, and to hate that unknown rival with a fierce hatred; nor did he fail to blame his mother for her folly in bringing such a man to Mount Royal.

'How could I suppose that Belle would fall in love with him?' asked Mrs. Tregonell, meekly. 'I knew how attached she was to you.'

'Attached? yes; but that kind of attachment means so little. She had known me all her life. I was nobody in her estimation—no more than the chairs and tables—and this man was a novelty; and again, what has a girl to do in such an out-of-the-way place as this but fall in love with the first comer; it is almost the only amusement open to her. You ought to have known better than to have invited that fellow here, mother; you knew that I meant to marry Belle. You ought to have guarded her for me—kept off dangerous rivals. Instead of that you must needs go out of your way to get that fellow here.'

'You ought to have come home sooner, Leonard.'

'That's nonsense. I was enjoying my life where I was. How could I suppose you would be such a fool?'

'Don't say such hard things, Leonard. Think how lonely my life was. The invitation to Mr. Hamleigh was not a new idea; I had asked him half a dozen times before. I wanted to see him and know him for his father's sake.'

'His father's sake!—a man whom you loved better than ever you loved my father, I dare say.'

'No, Leonard, that is not true.'

'You think not, perhaps, now my father is dead; but I dare say while he was alive you were always regretting that other man. Nothing exalts a man so much in a woman's mind as his dying. Look at the affection of widows as compared with that of wives.'

Mrs. Tregonell strove her hardest to convince her son that his cousin's affections were now free—that it was his business to win her heart; but Leonard complained that his mother had spoiled his chances—that all the freshness of Christabel's feelings must have been worn off in an engagement that had lasted nearly a year.

'She'll have me fast enough, I daresay,' he said, with his easy, confident air—that calm masculine consciousness of superiority, as of one who talks of an altogether inferior creature; 'all the faster, perhaps, on account of having made a *fiasco* of her first engagement. A girl doesn't like to be pointed at as jilt or jilted. But I shall always feel uncomfortable about this fellow, Hamleigh. I shall never be able quite to believe in my wife.'

'Leonard, how can you talk like that, you who know Christabel's high principles.'

'Yes, but I wanted to be sure that she had never cared for any one but me; and you have spoiled my chances of that.'

He stayed little more than a month in London, going back to Mount Royal soon after Ascot, and while the June roses were still in their glory. Brief as his absence had been, even his careless eye could see that his mother had changed for the worse since their parting. The hollow cheek had grown hollower, the languid eye more languid, the hand that clung so fondly to his broad, brown palm, was thinner, and more waxen of hue.

His mother welcomed him with warmest love.

'My dearest one,' she said, tenderly, 'this is an unexpected delight. It is so good of you to come back to me so soon. I want to have you with me, dear, as much as possible—now.'

'Why, mother?' he asked, kindly, for a dull pain in his breast seemed to answer to these words of hers.

'Because I do not think it will be for long. I am very weak, dear. Life seems to be slipping away from me; but there is no pain, no terror. I feel as if I were being gently carried along a slow gliding stream to some sheltered haven, which I can picture to myself, although I have never seen it. I have only one care, Leonard, one anxiety, and that is for your future happiness. I want your life to be full of joy, dearest, and I want it to be a good life, like your father's.'

'Yes, he was a good old buffer, wasn't he?' said Leonard. 'Everybody about here speaks well of him; but, then, I daresay that's because he had plenty of money, and wasn't afraid to spend it, and was an easy master, and all that sort of thing, don't you know. That's a kind of goodness which isn't very difficult for a man to practise.'

'Your father was a Christian, Leonard—a sound, practical, Christian, and he did his duty in every phase of life,' answered the widow, half proudly, half reproachfully.

'No doubt. All I say is, that's it's uncommonly easy to be a Christian under such circumstances.'

'Your circumstances will be as easy, I trust, Leonard, and your surroundings no less happy, if you win your cousin for your wife. And I feel sure you will win her. Ask her soon, dear—ask her very soon—that I may see you married to her before I die.'

'You think she'll say yes, if I do? I don't want to precipitate matters, and get snubbed for my pains.'

'I think she will say yes. She must know how my heart is set upon this marriage. It has been the dream of my life.'

Despite his self-assurance—his fixed opinion as to his own personal and social value—Leonard Tregonell hesitated a little at asking that question which must certainly be one of the most solemn inquiries of a man's life. His cousin had been all kindness and sweetness to him since his return; yet in his inmost heart he knew that her regard for him was at best of a calm, cousinly quality. He knew this, but he told himself that if she were only willing to accept him as her husband, the rest must follow. It would be his business to see that she was a good wife, and in time she would grow fonder of him, no doubt. He meant to be an indulgent husband. He would be very proud of her beauty, grace, accomplishments. There was no man among his acquaintance who could boast of such a charming wife. She should have her own way in everything: of course, so long as her way did not run counter to his. She would be mistress of one of the finest places in Cornwall, the house in which she had been reared, and which she loved with that foolish affection which cats, women, and other inferior animals feel for familiar habitations. Altogether, as Mr. Tregonell told himself, in his simple and expressive language, she would have a very good time, and it would be hard lines if she were not grateful, and did not take kindly to him. Yet he hesitated considerably before putting the crucial question ; and at last took the leap hurriedly, and not too judiciously, one lovely June morning, when he and Christabel had gone for a long ride alone. They were not in the habit of riding alone, and Major Bree was to have been their companion upon this particular morning, but he had sent at the last moment to excuse himself, on account of a touch of sciatica. They rode early, leaving Mount Royal soon after eight, so as to escape the meridian sun. The world was still fresh and dewy as they rode slowly up the hill, and then down again into the lanes leading towards Camelford ; and there was that exquisite feeling of purity in the atmosphere which wears off as the day grows older.

'My mother is looking rather seedy, Belle, don't you think,' he began.

'She is looking very ill, Leonard. She has been ill for a long time. God grant we may keep her with us a few years yet, but I am full of fear about her. I go to her room every morning with an aching heart, dreading what the night may have brought. Thank God, you came home when you did. It would have been cruel to stay away longer.'

'That's very good in you, Belle—uncommonly good—to talk about cruelty, when you must know that it was your fault I stayed away so long.'

'My fault? What had I do do with it?'

'Everything. I should have been home a year and a half ago—home last Christmas twelvemonth. I had made all my plans with that intention, for I was slightly home-sick in those days—didn't relish the idea of three thousand miles of everlasting wet between me and those I loved—and I was coming across the Big Drink as fast as a Cunard could bring me, when I got mother's letter telling me of your engagement. Then I coiled up, and made up my mind to stay in America till I'd done some big licks in the sporting line.'

'Why should that have influenced you?' Christabel asked, coldly.

'Why? Confound it! Belle, you know that without asking. You must know that it wouldn't be over-pleasant for me to be living at Mount Royal while you and your lover were spooning about the place. You don't suppose I could quite have stomached that, do you—to see another man making love to the girl I always meant to marry? For you know, Belle, I always did mean it. When you were in pinafores I made up my mind that you were the future Mrs. Tregonell.'

'You did me a great honour,' said Belle, with an icy smile, and I suppose I ought to be very proud to hear it—now. Perhaps, if you had told me your intentions while I was in pinafores I might have grown up with a due appreciation of your goodness. But you see, as you never said anything about it, my life took another bent.'

'Don't chaff, Belle,' exclaimed Leonard. 'I'm in earnest. I was hideously savage when I heard that you had got yourself engaged to a man whom you'd only known a week or two—a man who had led a racketty life in London and Paris——'

'Stop, cried Christabel, turning upon him with flashing eyes, 'I forbid you to speak of him. What right have you to mention his name to me? I have suffered enough, but that is an impertinence I will not endure. If you are going to say another word about him I'll ride back to Mount Royal as fast as my horse can carry me.'

'And get spilt on the way. Why, what a spitfire you are Belle. I had no idea there was such a spice of the devil in you,' said Leonard, somewhat abashed by this rebuff. Well, I'll hold my tongue about him in future. I'd much rather talk about you and me, and our prospects. What is to become of you, Belle, when the poor mother goes? You and the doctor have both made up your minds that she's not long for this world. For my own part, I'm not such a croaker, and I've known many a creaking door hanging a precious long time on its hinges. Still, it's well to be prepared for the worst. Where is your life to be spent, Belle, when the mater has sent in her checks?'

'Heaven knows!' answered Christabel, tears welling up in her eyes, as she turned her head from the questioner. 'My life will be little worth living when she is gone—but I daresay I shall go on living all the same. Sorrow takes such a long time to kill any one. I suppose Jessie and I will go on the Continent, and travel from place to place, trying to forget the old dear life among new scenes and new people.'

'And nicely you will get yourselves talked about,' said Leonard, with that unhesitating brutality which his friends called frankness—'a young and handsome woman without any male relative, wandering about the Continent.'

'I shall have Jessie.'

'A paid companion—a vast protection she would be to you—about as much as a Pomeranian dog, or a poll parrot.'

'Then I can stay in England,' answered Christabel, indifferently. 'It will matter very little where I live.'

'Come, Belle,' said Leonard, in a friendly, comfortable tone, laying his broad strong hand on her horse's neck, as they rode slowly side by side up the narrow road, between hedges filled with honeysuckle and eglantine, 'this is flying in the face of Providence, which has made you young and handsome, and an heiress, in order that you might get the most out of life. Is a young woman's life to come to an end all at once because an elderly woman dies? That's rank nonsense. That's the kind of way widows talk in their first edition of crape and caps. But they don't mean it, my dear; or, say they think they mean it, they never hold by it. That kind of widow is always a wife again before the second year of her widowhood is over. And to hear you—not quite one-and-twenty, and as fit as a fid—in the very zenith of your beauty,' said Leonard, hastily correcting the horsey turn of his compliment,—'to hear you talk in that despairing way is too provoking. Came, Belle, be rational. Why should you go wandering about Switzerland and Italy with a shrewish little old maid like Jessie Bridgeman—when—when you can stay at Mount Royal and be its mistress. I always meant you to be my wife, Belle, and I still mean it—in spite of bygones.'

You are very good—very forgiving,' said Christabel, with most irritating placidity, 'but unfortunately I never meant to be your wife then—and I don't mean it now.'

'In plain words, you reject me?'

'If you intend this for an offer, most decidedly,' answered Christabel, as firm as a rock. 'Come, Leonard, don't look so angry; let us be friends and cousins—almost brother and sister—as we have been in all the years that are gone. Let us unite in the endeavour to make your dear mother's life happy—so happy, that she may grow strong and well again—restored by perfect freedom from care. If you and I were to quarrel she would be miserable. We must be good friends always—if it were only for her sake.'

'That's all very well, Christabel, but a man's feelings are not so entirely within his control as you seem to suppose. Do you think I shall ever forget how you threw me over for a fellow you had only known a week or so—and now, when I tell you how, from my boyhood, I have relied upon your being my wife—always kept you in my mind as the one only woman who was to bear my name, and sit at the head of my table, you coolly inform me that it can never be? You would rather go wandering about the world with a hired companion——'

'Jessie is not a hired companion—she is my very dear friend.'

'You choose to call her so—but she came to Mount Royal in answer to an advertisement, and my mother pays her wages, just like the housemaids. You would rather roam about with Jessie Bridgeman, getting yourself talked about at every *table d'hôte* in Europe—a prey for every Captain Deuceace, or Loosefish, on the Continent—than you would be my wife, and mistress of Mount Royal.'

'Because nearly a year ago I made up my mind never to be any man's wife, Leonard,' answered Christabel, gravely. 'I should hate myself if I were to depart from that resolve.'

'You mean that when you broke with Mr. Hamleigh you did not think there was any one in the world good enough to stand in his shoes,' said Leonard, savagely. 'And for the sake of a man who turned out so badly that you were obliged to chuck him up, you refuse a fellow who has loved you all his life.'

Christabel turned her horse's head, and went homewards at a sharp trot, leaving Leonard, discomfited, in the middle of the lane. He had nothing to do but to trot meekly after her, afraid to go too fast, lest he should urge her horse to a bolt, and managing at last to overtake her at the bottom of a hill.

'Do find some grass somewhere, so that we may get a canter,' she said; and her cousin knew that there was to be no more conversation that morning.

CHAPTER XIV.

'BUT HERE IS ONE WHO LOVES YOU AS OF OLD.'

After this Leonard sulked, and the aspect of home life at Mount Royal became cloudy and troubled. He was not absolutely uncivil to his cousin, but he was deeply resentful, and he showed his resentment in various petty ways—descending so low as to give an occasional sly kick to Randie. He was grumpy in his intercourse with his mother; he took every opportunity of being rude to Miss Bridgeman; he sneered at all their womanly occupations, their charities, their church-going. That domestic sunshine which had so gladdened the widow's heart, was gone for ever, as it seemed. Her son now snatched at every occasion for getting away from home. He dined at Bodmin one night—at Launceston, another. He had friends to meet at Plymouth, and dined and slept at the 'Duke of Cornwall.' He came home bringing worse devils—in the way of ill-temper and rudeness—than those which he had taken away with him. He no longer pretended the faintest interest in Christabel's playing—confessing frankly that all classical compositions, especially those of Beethoven, suggested to him that far-famed melody which was fatal to the traditional cow. He no longer offered to make her a fine billiard player. 'No woman ever could play billiards,' he said, contemptuously 'they have neither eye nor wrist; they know nothing about strengths; and always handle their cue as if it was Moses's rod, and was going to turn into a snake and bite 'em.'

Mrs. Tregonell was not slow to guess the cause of her son's changed humour. She was too intensely anxious for the fulfilment of this chief desire of her soul not to be painfully conscious of failure. She had urged Leonard to speak soon—and he had spoken—with disastrous result. She had seen the angry cloud upon her son's brow when he came home from that tête-à-tête ride with Christabel. She feared to question him, for it was her rash counsel, perhaps, which had brought this evil result to pass. Yet she could not hold her peace for ever. So one evening, when Jessie and Christabel were dining at Trevalga Rectory, and Mrs. Tregonell was enjoying the sole privilege of her son's company, she ventured to approach the subject.

'How altered you have been lately'—lately, meaning for at least a month—'in your manner to your cousin, Leonard,' she said, with a feeble attempt to speak lightly, her voice tremulous with suppressed emotion. 'Has she offended you in any way? You and she used to be so very sweet to each other.'

'Yes, she was all honey when I first came home, wasn't she, mother?' returned Leonard, nursing his boot, and frowning at the lamp on the low table by Mrs. Tregonell's chair. 'All hypocrisy—rank humbug—that's what it was. She is still bewailing that fellow whom you brought here—and, mark my words, she'll marry him sooner or later. She threw him over in a fit of temper, and pride, and jealousy; and when she finds she can't live without him she'll take some means of bringing him back to her. It was all your doing mother. You spoiled my chances when you brought your old sweetheart's son into this house. I don't think you could have had much respect for my dead father when you invited that man to Mount Royal.'

Mrs. Tregonell's mild look of reproach might have touched the hardest heart; but it was lost on Leonard, who sat scowling at the lamp, and did not once meet his mother's eyes.

'It is not kind of you to say that Leonard,' she said, gently; 'you ought to know that I was a true and loving wife to your father, and that I have always honoured his memory, as a true wife should He knew that I was interested in Angus Hamleigh's career, and he never resented that feeling. I am sorry your cousin has rejected you—more sorry than even you yourself can be, I believe, for your marriage has been the dream of my life. But we cannot control fate. Are you really fond of her, dear?'

'Fond of her? A great deal too fond—foolishly—ignominiously fond of her—so fond that I am beginning to detest her.'

'Don't despair then, Leonard. Let this first refusal count for nothing. Only be patient, and gentle with her—not cold and rude, as you have been lately.'

'It's easy to talk,' said Leonard, contemptuously. 'But do you suppose I can feel very kindly towards a girl who refused me as coolly as if I had been asking her to dance, and who let me see at the same time that she is still passionately in love with Angus Hamleigh. You should have seen how she blazed out at me when I mentioned his name—her eyes flaming—her cheeks first crimson and then deadly pale. That's what love means. And, even if she were willing to be my wife to-morrow, she would never give me such love as that. Curse her,' muttered the lover between his clenched teeth; 'I didn't know how fond I was of her till she refused me; and now, I could crawl at her feet, and sue to her as a palavering Irish beggar sues for alms, cringing and fawning, and flattering and lying—and yet in my heart of hearts I should be savage with her all the time, knowing that she will never care for me as she cared for that other fellow.'

'Leonard, if you knew how it pains me to hear you talk like that,' said Mrs. Tregonell. 'It makes me fearful of your impetuous, self-willed nature.'

'Self-will be ——— ! somethinged!' growled Leonard. 'Did you ever know a man who cultivated anybody else's will? Would you have me pretend to be better than I am—tell you that I can feel all affection for the girl who preferred the first stranger who came in her way to the playfellow and companion of her childhood?'

'If you had been a little less tormenting, a little less exacting with her in those days, Leonard, I think she would have remembered you more tenderly,' said Mrs. Tregonell.

'If you are going to lecture me about what I was as a boy we'd better cut the conversation,' retorted Leonard. 'I'll go and practice the spot-stroke for half an hour, while you take your after-dinner nap.'

'No, dear, don't go away. I don't feel in the least inclined for sleep. I had no idea of lecturing you, Leonard, believe me; only I cannot help regretting, as you do, that Christabel should not be more attached to you. But I feel very sure that, if you are patient, she will come to think differently by-and-by.'

'Didn't you tell me to ask her—and quickly?'

'Yes, that was because I was impatient. Life seemed slipping away from me—and I was so eager to be secure of my dear boy's happiness. Let us try different tactics, Leo. Take things quietly for a little—behave to your cousin just as if there had been nothing of this kind between you, and who knows what may happen.'

'I know of one thing that may and will happen next October, unless the lady changes her tune,' answered Leonard, sulkily.

'What is that?'

'I shall go to South America—do a little mountaineering in the Equatorial Andes—enjoy a little life in Valparaiso, Truxillo—Lord knows where! I've done North America, from Canada to Frisco, and now I shall do the South.'

'Leonard, you would not be so cruel as to leave me to die in my loneliness; for I think, dear, you must know that I have not long to live.'

'Come, mother, I believe you fancy yourself ever so much worse than you really are. This jog-trot, monotonous life of yours would breed vapours in the liveliest person. Besides, if you should be ill while I am away, you'll have your niece, whom you love as a daughter—and perhaps your niece's husband, this dear Angus of yours—to take care of you.'

'You are very hard upon me, Leonard—and yet, I went against my conscience for your sake. I let Christabel break with her lover. I said never one word in his favour, although I must have known in my heart that they would both be miserable. I had your interest at heart more than theirs—I thought, "here is a chance for my boy."'

'You were very considerate—a day after the fair. Don't you think it would have been better to be wise before the event, and not to have invited that coxcomb to Mount Royal?'

He came again and again to the charge, always with fresh bitterness. He could not forgive his mother for this involuntary wrong which she had done to him.

After this he went off to the solitude of the billiard-room, and a leisurely series of experiments upon the spot-stroke. It was his only idea of a contemplative evening.

He was no less sullen and gloomy in his manner to Christabel next morning at breakfast, for all his mother had said to him overnight. He answered his cousin in monosyllables, and was rude to Randie—wondered that his mother should allow dogs in her dining-room—albeit Randie's manners were far superior to his own.

Later in the morning, when Christabel and her aunt were alone, the girl crept to her favourite place beside Mrs. Tregonell's chair, and with her folded arms resting on the cushioned elbow, looked up lovingly at the widow's grave, sad face.

'Auntie, dearest, you know so well how fondly I love you, that I am sure you won't think me any less loving and true, if I you to let me leave you for a little while. Let me go away somewhere with Jessie, to some quiet German town, where I can improve myself in music, and where she and I can lead a hard-working, studious life, just like a couple of Girton girls. You remember, last year you suggested that we should travel, and I refused your offer, thinking that I should be happier at home; but now I feel the need of a change.'

'And you would leave me, now that my health is broken, and that I am so dependent on your love?' said Mrs. Tregonell, with mild reproachfulness.

Christabel bent down to kiss the thin, white hand that lay on the cushion near her—anxious to hide the tears that sprang quickly to her eyes.

'You have Leonard,' she faltered. 'You are happy, are you not, dearest, now Leonard is at home again.'

'At home—yes, I thank God that my son is under my roof once more. But how long may he stay at home? How much do I have of his company—in and out all day—anywhere but at my side—making every possible excuse for leaving me? He has begun, already, to talk of going to South America in the autumn. Poor boy, he is restless and unhappy; and I know the reason. You must know it too, Belle. It is your fault. You have spoiled the dream of my life.'

'Auntie, is this generous, is this fair?' pleaded Christabel, with her head still bent over the pale wasted hand.

'It is natural at least,' answered the widow, impetuously. 'Why cannot you care for my boy, why cannot you understand and value his devotion? It is not an idle fancy—born of a few weeks' acquaintance—not the last new caprice of a battered *roué*, who offers his worn-out heart to you when other women have done with it. Leonard's is the love of long years—the love of a fresh unspoiled nature. I know that he has not Angus Hamleigh's refinement of manner—he is not so clever—so imaginative—but of what value is such surface refinement when the man's inner nature is coarse and profligate. A man who has lived among impure women must have become coarse; there must be deterioration, ruin, for a man's nature in such a life as that,' continued Mrs. Tregonell, passionately, her resentment against Angus Hamleigh kindling as she thought how he had ousted her son. 'Why should you not value my boy's love?' she asked again. 'What is there wanting in him that you should treat him so contemptuously? He is young, handsome, brave—owner of this place of which you are so fond. Your marriage with him would bring the Champernowne estate together again. Everybody was sorry to see it divided. It would bring together two of the oldest and best names in the county. You might call your eldest son Champernowne Tregonell.'

'Don't, Auntie, don't go on like that,' entreated Christabel, piteously: if you only knew how little such arguments influence me: 'the glories of our rank and state are shadows, not substantial things.' What difference do names and lands make in the happiness of a life? If Angus Hamleigh had been a ploughman's son, like Burns—nameless—penniless—only just himself, I should have loved him exactly the same. Dearest, these are the things in which we cannot be governed by other people's wisdom. Our hearts choose for us; in spite of us. I have been obliged to think seriously of life since Leonard and I had that unlucky conversation the other day. He told you about it, perhaps?'

'He told me that you refused him.'

'As I would have refused any other man, Auntie. I have made up my mind to live and die unmarried. It is the only tribute I can offer to one I loved so well.'

'And who proved so unworthy of your love,' said Mrs. Tregonell, moodily.

'Do not speak of him, if you cannot speak kindly. You once loved his father, but you seem to have forgotten that. Let me go away for a little while, Auntie—a few months only, if you like. My presence in this house only does harm. Leonard is angry with me—and you are angry for his sake. We are all unhappy now—nobody talks freely—or laughs—or takes life pleasantly. We all feel constrained and miserable. Let me go, dear. When I am gone you and Leonard can be happy together.'

'No, Belle, we cannot. You have spoiled his life. You have broken his heart.'

Christabel smiled a little contemptuously at the mother's wailing. 'Hearts are not so easily broken,' she said, 'Leonard's least of all. He is angry because for the first time in his life he finds himself thwarted. He wants to marry me, and I don't want to marry him. Do you remember how angry he was when he wanted to go out shooting, at eleven years of age, and you refused him a gun. He moped and fretted for a week, and you were quite as unhappy as he was. It is almost the first thing I remember about him. When he found you were quite firm in your refusal, he left off sulking, and reconciled himself to the inevitable. He will do just the same about this refusal of mine—when I am out of his sight. But my presence here irritates him.'

'Christabel, if you leave me I shall know that you have never loved me,' said Mrs. Tregonell, with sudden vehemence.' 'You must know that I am dying—very slowly, perhaps—a wearisome decay for those who can only watch and wait, and bear with me till I am dead. But I know and feel that I am dying. This trouble will hasten my end, and instead of dying in peace, with the assurance of my boy's happy future—with the knowledge that he will have a virtuous and loving wife, a wife of my own training, to guide him and influence him for good—I shall die miserable, fearing that he may fall into evil hands, and that evil days may come upon him. I know how impetuous, how impulsive he is; how easily governed through his feelings, how little able to rule himself by hard common-sense. And you, who have known him all your life—who know the best and worst of him—you can be so indifferent to his happiness, Christabel. How can I believe, in the face of this, that you ever loved me, his mother?

'I have loved you as *my* mother,' replied the girl, with her arms round her aunt's neck, her lips pressed against that pale thin cheek. 'I love you better than any one in this world. If God would spare you for years to come, and we could live always together, and be all and all to each other as we have been, I think I could be quite happy. Yes, I could feel as if there were nothing wanting in this life. But I cannot marry a man I do not love, whom I never can love.'

'He would take you on trust, Belle,' murmured the mother, imploringly; 'he would be content with duty and good faith. I know how true and loyal you are, dearest, and that you would be a perfect wife. Love would come afterwards.'

'Will it make you happier if I don't go away, Auntie?' asked Christabel, gently.

'Much happier.'

'Then I will stay; and Leonard may be as rude to me as he likes: he may do anything disagreeable, except kick Randie; and I will not murmur. But you and I must never talk of him as we have talked to-day: it can do no good.'

After this came much kissing and hugging, and a few tears; and it was agreed that Christabel should forego her idea of six months' study of classical music at the famous conservatoire at Leipsic.

She and Jessie had made all their plans before she spoke to her aunt; and when she informed Miss Bridgeman that she had given way to Mrs. Tregonell's wish, and had abandoned all idea of Germany, that strong-minded young woman expressed herself most unreservedly.

'You are a fool!' she exclaimed. 'No doubt that's an outrageous remark from a person in my position to an heiress like you; but I can't help it. You are a fool—a yielding, self-abnegating fool! If you stay here you will marry that man. There is no escape possible for you. Your aunt has made up her mind about it. She will worry you till you give your consent, and then you will be miserable ever afterwards.'

'I shall do nothing of the kind. I wonder that you can think me so weak.'

'If you are weak enough to stay, you will be weak enough to do the other thing,' retorted Jessie.

'How can I go when my aunt looks at me with those sad eyes, dying eyes—they are so changed since last year—and implores me to stop? I thought you loved her, Jessie?'

'I do love her, with a fond and grateful affection. She was my first friend outside my own home; she is my benefactress. But I have to think of your welfare, Christabel—your welfare in this world and the world to come. Both will be in danger if you stay here and marry Leonard Tregonell.'

'I am going to stay here; and I am not going to marry Leonard. Will that assurance satisfy you? One would think I had no will of my own.'

'You have not the will to withstand your aunt. She parted you and Mr. Hamleigh; and she will marry you to her son.'

'The parting was my act,' said Christabel.

'It was your aunt who brought it about. Had she been true and loyal there would have been no such parting. If you had only trusted to me in that crisis, I think I might have saved you some sorrow; but what's done cannot be undone.'

'There are some cases in which a woman must judge for herself,' Christabel replied, coldly.

'A woman, yes—a woman who has had some experience of life; but not a girl, who knows nothing of the hard real world and its temptations, difficulties, struggles. Don't let us talk of it any more. I cannot trust myself to speak when I remember how shamefully he was treated.'

Christabel stared in amazement. The calm, practical Miss Bridgeman spoke with a passionate vehemence which took the girl's breath away; and yet, in her heart of hearts, Christabel was grateful to her for this sudden flash of anger.

'I did not know you liked him so much—that you were so sorry for him,' she faltered.

'Then you ought to have known, if you ever took the trouble to remember how good he always was to me, how sympathetic, how tolerant of my company when it was forced upon him day after day, how seemingly unconscious of my plainness and dowdiness. Why there was not a present he gave me which did not show the most thoughtful study of my tastes and fancies. I never look at one of his gifts—I was not obliged to fling his offerings back in his face as you were—without wondering that a fine gentleman could be so full of small charities and delicate courtesy. He was like one of those wits and courtiers one reads of in Burnet—not spotless, like Tennyson's Arthur—but the very essence of refinement and good feeling. God bless him! whereever he is.'

'You are very odd sometimes, Jessie,' said Christabel, kissing her friend, 'but you have a noble heart.'

There was a marked change in Leonard's conduct when he and his cousin met in the drawing-room before dinner. He had been absent at luncheon, on a trout-fishing expedition; but there had been time since his return for a long conversation between him and his mother. She had told him how his sullen temper had almost driven Christabel from the house, and how she had been only induced to stay by an appeal to her affection. This evening he was all amiability, and tried to make his peace with Randie, who received his caresses with a stolid forbearance rather than with gratification. It was easier to make friends with Christabel than with the dog, for she wished to be kind to her cousin on his mother's account.

That evening the reign of domestic peace seemed to be renewed. There were no thunder-clouds in the atmosphere. Leonard strolled about the lawn with his mother and Christabel, looking at the roses, and planning where a few more choice trees might yet be added to the collection. Mrs. Tregonell's walks now rarely went beyond this broad velvet lawn, or the shrubberies that bordered it. She drove to church on Sundays, but she had left off visiting that involved long drives, though she professed herself delighted to see her friends. She did not want the house to become dull and gloomy for Leonard. She even insisted that there should be a garden party on Christabel's twenty-first birthday; and she was delighted when some of the old friends who came to Mount Royal that day insinuated their congratulations, in a tentative manner, upon Miss Courtenay's impending engagement to her cousin.

'There is nothing definitely settled,' she told Mrs. St. Aubyn, 'but I have every hope that it will be so. Leonard adores her.'

'And it would be a much more suitable match for her than the other,' said Mrs. St. Aubyn, a commonplace matron of irreproachable lineage: 'it would be so nice for you to have her settled near you. Would they live at Mount Royal?'

'Of course. Where else should my son live but in his father's house?'

'But it is your house.'

'Do you think I should allow my life-interest in the place to stand in the way of Leonard's enjoyment of it?' exclaimed Mrs. Tregonell. 'I should be proud to take the second place in his house—proud to see his young wife at the head of his table.'

'That is all very well in theory, but I have never seen it work out well in fact,' said the Rector of Trevalga, who made a third in the little group seated on the edge of the wide lawn, where sportive youth was playing tennis, in half a dozen courts, to the enlivening strains of a military band from Bodmin

'How thoroughly happy Christabel looks,' observed another friendly matron to Mrs. Tregonell, a little later in the afternoon: 'she seems to have quite got over her trouble about Mr. Hamleigh.'

'Yes, I hope that is forgotten,' answered Mrs. Tregonell

This garden party was an occasion of unspeakable pain to Christabel. Her aunt had insisted upon sending out the invitations. There must be some kind of festival upon her adopted daughter's coming of age. The inheritor of lands and money was a person whose twenty-first birthday could not be permitted to slip by unmarked, like any other day in the calendar.

"If we were to have no garden party this summer people would say you were broken-hearted at the sad end of last year's engagement, darling,' said Mrs. Tregonell, when Christabel had pleaded against the contemplated assembly, 'and I know your pride would revolt at that.'

'Dear Auntie, my pride has been levelled to the dust, if I ever had any; it will not raise its head on account of a garden party.'

Mrs. Tregonell insisted, albeit even her small share of the preparations, the mere revision of the list of guests—the discussion and acceptance of Jessie Bridgeman's arrangements—was a fatigue to the jaded mind and enfeebled body. When the day came the mistress of Mount Royal carried herself with the old air of quiet dignity which her friends knew so well. People saw that she was aged, that she had grown pale and thin and wan; and they ascribed this change in her to anxiety about her niece's engagement. There were vague ideas as to the cause of Mr. Hamleigh's dismissal—dim notions of terrible iniquities, startling revelations, occurring on the very brink of marriage. That section of county society which did not go to London knew a great deal more about the details of the story than the people who had been in town at the time and had seen Miss Courtenay and her lover almost daily. For those daughters of the soil who but rarely crossed the Tamar the story of Miss Courtenay's engagement was a social mystery of so dark a complexion that it afforded inexhaustible material for tea-table gossip. A story, of which no one seemed to know the exact details, gave wide ground for speculation, and could always be looked at from new points of view.

'And now here was the same Miss Courtenay smiling upon her friends, fair and radiant, showing no traces of last year's tragedy in her looks or manners; being, indeed, one of those women who do not wear their hearts upon their sleeves for daws to peck at. The local mind, therefore, arrived at the conclusion that Miss Courtenay had consoled herself for the loss of one lover by the gain of another, and was now engaged to her cousin.

Clara St. Aubyn ventured to congratulate her upon this happy issue out of bygone griefs.

'I am so glad,' she said, squeezing Christabel's hand, during an inspection of the hot-houses. 'I like him so much.'

'I don't quite understand,' replied Christabel, with a freezing look: 'who is it whom you like? The new Curate?'

'No, dear, don't pretend to misunderstand me. I am so pleased to think that you and your cousin are going to make a match of it. He is so handsome—such a fine, frank, open-hearted manner—so altogether nice.'

'I am pleased to hear you praise him,' said Christabel, still supremely cold; 'but my cousin is my cousin, and will never be anything more.'

'You don't mean that?'

'I do—without the smallest reservation.'

Clara became thoughtful. Leonard Tregonell was one of the best matches in the county, and he had always been civil to her. They had tastes in common, were both horsey and doggy, and plain-spoken to brusqueness. Why should not she be mistress of Mount Royal, by-and-bye, if Christabel despised her opportunities?

At half-past seven, the last carriage had driven away from the porch; and Mrs. Tregonell, thoroughly exhausted by the exertions of the afternoon, reclined languidly in her favourite chair, moved from its winter-place by the hearth, to a deep embayed window looking on to the rose-garden. Christabel sat on a stool at her aunt's feet, her fair head resting against the cushioned elbow of Mrs. Tregonell's chair.

'Well, Auntie, the people are gone and the birthday is over. Isn't that a blessing?' she said, lightly.

'Yes, dear, it is over, and you are of age—your own mistress. My guardianship expires to-day. I wonder whether I shall find any difference in my darling now she is out of leading-strings.'

'I don't think you will, Auntie. I have not much inclination for desperate flights of any kind. What can freedom or the unrestricted use of my fortune give me, which your indulgence has not already given? What whim or fancy of mine have you ever thwarted? No, aunt Di, I don't think there is any scope for rebellion on my part.'

'And you will not leave me, dear, till the end?' pleaded the widow. 'Your bondage cannot be for very long.'

'Auntie! how can you speak like that, when you know—when you must know that I have no one in the world but you now—no one, dearest,' said Christabel, on her knees at her aunt's feet, clasping and kissing the pale transparent hands. 'I have not the knack of loving many people. Jessie is very good to me, and I am fond of her as my friend and companion. Uncle Oliver is all goodness, and I am fond of him in just the same way. But I never *loved* any one but you and Angus. Angus is gone from me, and if God takes you, Auntie, my prayer is that I may speedily follow you.'

'My love, that is a blasphemous prayer: it implies doubt in God's goodness. He means the young and innocent to be happy in this world—happy and a source of happiness to others. You will form new ties; a husband and children will console you for all you have lost in the past.'

'No, aunt, I shall never marry. Put that idea out of your mind. You will think less badly of me for refusing Leonard if you understand that I have made up my mind to live and die unmarried.'

'But I cannot and will not believe that, Belle: whatever you may think now, a year hence your ideas will have entirely altered. Remember my own history. When George Hamleigh died I thought the world—so far as it concerned me—had come to an end, that I had only to wait for death. My fondest hope was that I should die within the year, and be buried in a grave near his—yet five years afterwards I was a happy wife and mother.'

'God was good to you,' said Christabel, quietly, thinking all the while that her aunt must have been made of a different clay from herself. There was a degradation in being able to forget: it implied a lower kind of organism than that finely strung nature which loves once and once only.

CHAPTER XV.

'THAT LIP AND VOICE ARE MUTE FOR EVER.'

HAVING pledged herself to remain with her aunt to the end, Christabel was fain to make the best of her life at Mount Royal, and in order to do this she must needs keep on good terms with her cousin. Leonard's conduct of late had been irreproachable: he was attentive to his mother, all amiability to Christabel, and almost civil to Miss Bridgeman. He contrived to make his peace with Randie, and he made such a good impression upon Major Bree that he won the warm praises of that gentleman.

The cross country rides were resumed, the Major always in attendance; and Leonard and his cousin were seen so often together, riding, driving, or walking, that the idea of an engagement between them became a fixture in the local mind, which held that when one was off with the old love it was well to be on with the new.

And so the summer ripened and waned. Mrs. Tregonell's health seemed to improve in the calm happiness of a domestic life in which there was no indication of disunion. She had never surrendered her hope of Christabel's relenting. Leonard's frank and generous character—his good looks—his local popularity—must ultimately prevail over the memory of another—that other having so completely given up his chances. Mrs. Tregonell was half inclined to recognize the nobleness of that renunciation; half disposed to accept it as a proof that Angus Hamleigh's heart still hankered after the actress who had been his first infatuation. In either case no one could doubt that it was well for Christabel to be released from such an engagement. To wed Angus would have been to tie herself to sickness and death—to take upon herself the burden of early widowhood, to put on sackcloth and ashes as a wedding garment.

It was winter, and there were patches of snow upon the hills, and sea and sky were of one chill slatey hue, before Leonard ventured to repeat that question which he had asked with such ill effect in the sweet summer morning, between hedgerows flushed with roses. But through all the changes of the waning year there had been one purpose in his mind, and every act of his life had tended to one result. He had sworn to himself that his cousin should be his wife. Whatever barriers of disinclination, direct antagonism even, there might be on her side must be broken down by dogged patience, unyielding determination on his side. He had the spirit of the hunter, to whom that prey is most precious which costs the longest chase. He loved his cousin more passionately to-day, after keeping his feelings in check for six months, than he had loved her when he asked her to be his wife. Every day of delay had increased his ardour and strengthened his resolve.

It was New Year's day. Christabel and Miss Bridgeman had been to church in the morning, and had taken a long walk with Leonard, who contrived to waylay them at the church door after church. Then had come a rather late luncheon, after which Christabel spent an hour in her aunt's room reading to her, and talking a little in a subdued way. It was one of Mrs. Tregonell's bad days, a day upon which she could hardly leave her sofa, and Christabel came away from the invalid's room full of sadness.

She was sitting by the fire in the library, alone in the dusk, save for Randie's company, when her cousin came in and found her.

'Why, Belle, what are you doing all alone in the dark?' he exclaimed. 'I almost thought the room was empty.'

'I have been thinking,' she said, with a sigh.

'Your thoughts could not have been over-pleasant, I should think, by that sigh,' said Leonard, coming over to the hearth and drawing the logs together. 'There's a cheerful blaze for you Don't give way to sad thoughts on the first day of the year Belle: it's a bad beginning.'

'I have been thinking of your dear mother, Leonard: *my* mother, for she has been more to me than one mother in a hundred is to her daughter. She is with us to-day—a part of our lives—very frail and feeble, but still our own. Where will she be next New Year's day?'

'Ah, Belle, that's a bad look out for both of us,' answered Leonard, seating himself in his mother's empty chair. 'I'm afraid she won't last out the year that begins to-day. But she has seemed brighter and happier lately, hasn't she?'

'Yes, I think she has been happier,' said Christabel.

'Do you know why?'

His cousin did not answer him. She sat with her face bent over her dog, hiding her tears on Randie's sleek black head.

'I think I know why the mother has been so tranquil in her mind lately, Belle,' said Leonard, with unusual earnestness, 'and I think you know just as well as I do. She has seen you and me more friendly together—more cousinly—and she has looked forward to the fulfilment of an old wish and dream of hers. She has looked for the speedy realization of that wish, Belle, although six months ago it seemed hopeless. She wants to see the two people she loves best on earth united, before she is taken away. It would make the close of her life happy, if she could see my happiness secure. I believe you know that, Belle.'

'Yes, I know that it is so. But that can never be.'

'That is a hard saying, Christabel. Half a year ago I asked you a question, and you said no. Many a man in my position would have been too proud to run the risk of a second refusal. He would have gone away in a huff, and found comfort somewhere else. But I knew that there was only one woman in the the world who could make me happy, and I waited for her. You must own that I have been patient, have I not, Belle?'

'You have been very devoted to your dear mother—very good to me. I cannot deny that, Leonard,' Christabel answered, gravely.

She had dried her tears, and lifted her head from the dog's neck, and sat looking straight at the fire, self-possessed and sad. It seemed to her as if all possibility of happiness had gone out of her life.

'Am I to have no reward?' asked Leonard. 'You know with what hope I have waited—you know that our marriage would make my mother happy, that it would make the end of her life a festival. You owe me nothing, but you owe her something. That is sueing *in formâ pauperis*, isn't it, Belle? But I have no pride where you are concerned.'

'You ask me to be your wife; you don't even ask if I love you,' said Christabel, bitterly. 'What if I were to say yes, and then tell you afterwards that my heart still belongs to Angus Hamleigh.'

'You had better tell me that now, if it is so,' said Leonard, his face darkening in the firelight.

'Then I will tell you that it is so. I gave him up because I thought it my duty to give him up. I believed that in honour he belonged to another woman. I believe so still. But I have never left off loving him. That is why I have made up my mind never to marry.'

'You are wise,' retorted Leonard, 'such a confession as that would settle for most men. But it does not settle for me, Belle. I am too far gone. If you are a fool about Hamleigh, I am a fool about you. Only say you will marry me, and I will take my chance of all the rest. I know you will be a good wife; and I will be a good husband to you. And I suppose in the end you will get to care for me a little. One thing is certain, that I can't be happy without you; so I would gladly run the risk of an occasional taste of misery with you. Come, Belle, is it a bargain,' he pleaded, taking her unresisting hands. 'Say that it is, dearest. Let me kiss the future mistress of Mount Royal.'

He bent over her and kissed her—kissed those lips which had once been sacred to Angus Hamleigh, which she had sworn in her heart should be kissed by no other man upon earth. She recoiled from him with a shiver of disgust—no good omen for their wedded bliss.

'This will make our mother very happy,' said Leonard. Come to her now, Belle, and let us tell her.'

Christabel went with slow, reluctant steps, ashamed of the weakness which had yielded to persuasion and not to duty. But when Mrs. Tregonell heard the news from the triumphant lover, the light of happiness that shone upon the wan face was almost an all-sufficing reward for this last sacrifice.

'My love, my love,' cried the widow, clasping her niece to her breast. 'You have made my last earthly days happy. I have thought you cold and hard. I feared that I should die before you relented; but now you have made me glad and grateful. I reared you for this, I taught you for this, I have prayed for this ever since you were a child. I have prayed that my son might have a pure and perfect wife, and God has granted my prayer.'

After this came a period of such perfect content and tranquility for the invalid, that Christabel forgot her own sorrows. She lived in an atmosphere of gladness; congratulations, gifts were pouring in upon her every day; her aunt petted and cherished her, was never weary of praising and caressing her. Leonard was all submission as a lover. Major Bree was delighted at the security which this engagement promised for the carrying on of the line of Champernownes and Tregonells—the union of two fine estates. He had looked forward to a dismal period when the widow would be laid in her grave, her son a wanderer, and Christabel a resident at Plymouth or Bath; while spiders wove their webs in shadowy corners of the good old Manor house, and mice, to all appearance self-sustaining, scampered and scurried behind the panelling.

Jessie Bridgeman was the only member of Christabel's circle who refrained from any expression of approval.

'Did I not tell you that you must end by marrying him?' she exclaimed. 'Did I not say that if you stayed here the thing was inevitable? Continual dropping will wear away a stone; the stone is a fixture and can't help being dropped upon; but if you had stuck to your colours and gone to Leipsic to study the piano, you would have escaped the dropping.'

As there was no possible reason for delay, while there was a powerful motive for a speedy marriage, in the fact of Mrs. Tregonell's precarious health, and her ardent desire to see her son and her niece united before her fading eyes closed for ever upon earth and earthly cares, Christabel was fain to consent to the early date which her aunt and her lover proposed, and to allow all arrangements to be hurried on with that view.

So in the dawning of the year, when Proserpine's returning footsteps were only faintly indicated by pale snowdrops and early violets lurking in sheltered hedges, and by the gold and purple of crocuses in all the cottage gardens, Christabel put on her wedding gown, and whiter than the pale ivory tint of the soft sheeny satin, took her seat in the carriage beside her adopted mother, to be driven down into the valley, and up the hilly street, where all the inhabitants of Boscastle—save those who had gone on before to congregate by the lich-gate—were on the alert to see the bride go by.

Mrs. Tregonell was paler than her niece, the fine regular features blanched with that awful pallor which tells of disease—but her eyes were shining with the light of gladness.

'My darling,' she murmured, as they drove down to the harbour bridge, 'I have loved you all your life, but never as I love you to-day. My dearest, you have filled my soul with content.'

'I thank God that it should be so,' faltered Christabel.

'If I could only see you smile, dear,' said her aunt. 'Your expression is too sad for a bride.'

'Is it, Auntie? But marriage is a serious thing, dear. It means the dedication of a life to duty.'

'Duty which affection will make very light, I hope,' said Mrs. Tregonell, chilled by the cold statuesque face, wrapped in its cloudy veil. 'Christabel, my love, tell me that you are not unhappy—that this marriage is not against your inclination. It is of your own free will that you give yourself to my boy?'

'Yes, of my own free will,' answered Christabel, firmly.

As she spoke, it flashed upon her that Iphigenia would have given the same answer before they led her to the altar of offended Artemis. There are sacrifices offered with the victim's free consent, which are not the less sacrifices.

'Look, dear,' cried her aunt, as the children, clustering at the school-house gate—dismissed from school an hour before their time—waved their sturdy arms, and broke into a shrill treble cheer, 'everybody is pleased at this marriage.'

'If you are glad, dearest, I am content,' murmured her niece.

It was a very quiet wedding—or a wedding which ranks among quiet weddings now-a-days, when nuptial ceremonies are for the most part splendid. No train of bridesmaids in æsthetic colours, Duchess of Devonshire hats, and long mittens—no page-boys, staggering under gigantic baskets of flowers—no fuss or fashion, to make that solemn ceremony a raree-show for the gaping crowd. The Rector of Trevalga's two little girls were the only bridesmaids—dressed after Sir Joshua, in short-waisted dove-coloured frocks and pink sashes, mob caps and mittens, with big bunches of primroses and violets in their chubby hands.

Mrs. Tregonell looked superb in a dark ruby velvet gown, and long mantle of the same rich stuff, bordered with darkest sable. It was she who gave her niece away, while Major Bree acted as best man for Leonard. There were no guests at this winter wedding. Mrs. Tregonell's frail health was a sufficient reason for the avoidance of all pomp and show; and Christabel had pleaded earnestly for a very quiet wedding.

So before that altar where she had hoped to pledge herself for life and till death to Angus Hamleigh, Christabel gave her submissive hand to Leonard Tregonell, while the fatal words were spoken which have changed and blighted some few lives, to set against the many they have blessed and glorified. Still deadly pale, the bride went with the bridegroom to the vestry, to sign that book of fate, the register, Mrs. Tregonell following on Major Bree's arm, Miss Bridgeman—a neat little figure in silver grey poplin—and the child bride-maids crowding in after them, until the small vestry was filled with a gracious group, all glow of colour and sheen of silk and satin, in the glad spring sunshine.

'Now, Mrs. Tregonell,' said the Major, cheerily, when the bride and bridegroom had signed, 'let us have your name next, if you please; for I don't think there is any of us who more rejoices in this union than you do.'

The widow took the pen, and wrote her name below that of Christabel, with a hand that never faltered. The incumbent of Minster used to say afterwards that this autograph was the grandest in the register. But the pen dropped suddenly from the hand that had guided it so firmly. Mrs. Tregonell looked round at the circle of faces with a strange wild look in her own. She gave a faint half-stifled cry, and fell upon her son's breast, her arms groping about his shoulders feebly, as if they would fain have wound themselves round his neck, but could not, encumbered by the heavy mantle.

Leonard put his arm round her, and held her firmly to his breast.

'Dear mother, are you ill?' he asked, alarmed by that strange look in the haggard face.

'It is the end,' she faltered. 'Don't be sorry, dear. I am so happy.'

And thus, with a shivering sigh, the weary heart throbbed its last dull beat, the faded eyes grew dim, the limbs were dumb for ever.

The Rector tried to get Christabel out of the vestry before she could know what had happened—but the bride was clinging to her aunt's lifeless figure, half sustained in Leonard's arms, half resting on the chair which had been pushed forward to support her as she sank upon her son's breast. Vain to seek to delay the knowledge of sorrow. All was known to Christabel already, as she bent over that marble face which was scarcely whiter than her own.

CHAPTER XVI.

'NOT THE GODS CAN SHAKE THE PAST.

THERE was a sad silent week of waiting before the bride set forth upon her bridal tour, robed in deepest mourning. For six days the windows of Mount Royal were darkened, and Leonard and his newly wedded wife kept within the shadow of that house of death, almost as strictly as if they had been Jewish mourners, bound by ancient ceremonial laws, whereof the close observance is a kind of patriotism among a people who have no fatherland. All the hot-houses at Mount Royal gave out their treasures—white hyacinths, and rose-flushed cyclamen, gardenia, waxen camellias, faint Dijon roses—for the adornment of the death chamber. The corridor outside that darkened room had an odour of hot-house flowers. The house, folded in silence and darkness, felt like some splendid sepulchre. Leonard was deeply depressed by his mother's death; more shocked by its suddenness, by this discordant note in his triumphant marriage song, than by the actual fact; this loss having been long discounted in his own mind among the evils of the future.

Christabel's grief was terrible, albeit she had lived for the last year in constant fear of this affliction. Its bitterness was in no wise lessened because it had been long expected. Never even in her saddest moments had she realized the agony of that parting, the cold dull sense of loneliness, of dismal abandonment, in a loveless, joyless world, when that one beloved friend was taken from her. Leonard tried his best to console her, putting aside his own sorrow, in the endeavour to comfort his bride; but his efforts at consolation were not happy, for the most part taking the form of philosophical truisms which may be very good in an almanack, or as padding for a country newspaper, but which sound dull and meaningless to the ear of the mourner who says in his heart there was never any sorrow like unto my sorrow.

In the low sunlight of the March afternoon they laid Mrs. Tregonell's coffin in the family vault, beside the niche where her faithful husband of ten years' wedded life took his last long rest. There, in the darkness, the perfume of many flowers mixing with the cold earthly odours of the tomb, they left her who had for so long been the despotic mistress of Mount Royal; and then they drove back to the empty house, where the afternoon light that streamed in through newly opened windows had a garish look, as if it had no right to be there.

The widow's will was of the simplest. She left legacies to the old servants; her wardrobe, with the exception of laces and furs, to Dormer; mementoes to a few old friends; two thousand pounds in trust for certain small local charities; to Christabel all her jewels and books; and to her son everything else of which she died possessed. He was now by inheritance from his mother, and in right of his wife, master of the Champernowne estate, which, united to the Tregonell property, made him one of the largest landowners in the West of England. Christabel's fortune had been strictly settled on herself before her marriage, with reversion to Leonard in the failure of children; but the fact of this settlement, to which he had readily agreed, did not lessen Leonard's sense of importance as representative of the Tregonells and Champernownes.

Christabel and her husband started for the Continent on the day after the funeral, Leonard fervently hoping that change of scene and constant movement would help his wife to forget her grief. It was a dreary departure for a honeymoon tour—the sombre dress of bride and bridegroom, the doleful visage of Dormer, the late Mrs. Tregonell's faithful maid, whom the present Mrs. Tregonell retained for her own service, glad to have a person about her who had so dearly loved the dead. They travelled to Weymouth, crossed to Cherbourg, and thence to Paris, and on without stopping to Bordeaux, then, following the line southward, they visited all the most interesting towns of southern France—Albi, Montauban, Toulouse, Carcassonne, Narbonne, Montpellier, Nismes, and so to the fairy-like shores of the Mediterranean, lingering on their way to look at mediæval cathedrals, Roman baths and amphitheatres, citadels, prisons, palaces, aqueducts, all somewhat dry as dust and tiresome to Leonard, but full of interest to Christabel, who forgot her own griefs as she pored over these relics of pagan and Christian history.

Nice was in all its glory of late spring when, after a lingering progress, they arrived at that Brighton of the south. It was nearly six weeks since that March sunset which had lighted the funeral procession in Minster Churchyard, and Christabel was beginning to grow accustomed to the idea of her aunt's death—nay, had begun to look back with a dim sense of wonder at the happy time in which they two had been together, their love unclouded by any fear of doom and parting. That last year of Mrs. Tregonell's life had been Christabel's apprenticeship to grief. All the gladness and thoughtlessness of youth had been blighted by the knowledge of an inevitable parting—a farewell that must soon be spoken—a dear hand clasped fondly to-day, but which must be let go to-morrow.

Under that soft southern sky a faint bloom came back to Christabel's cheeks, which had not until now lost the wan whiteness they had worn on her wedding-day. She grew more cheerful, talked brightly and pleasantly to her husband, and put off the aspect of gloom with the heavy crape-shrouded gown which marked the first period of her mourning. She came down to dinner one evening in a gown of rich lustreless black silk, with a cluster of Cape jasmine among the folds of her white crape fichu, whereat Leonard rejoiced exceedingly, his being one of those philosophic minds which believe that the too brief days of the living should never be frittered away upon lamentations for the dead.

'You're looking uncommonly jolly, Belle,' said Leonard, as his wife took her seat at the little table in front of an open window overlooking the blue water and the amphitheatre of hills, glorified by the sunset. They were dining at a private table in the public room of the hotel, Leonard having a fancy for the life and bustle of the *table d'hôte* rather than the seclusion of his own apartments. Christabel hated sitting down with a herd of strangers; so, by way of compromise, they dined at their own particular table, and looked on at the public banquet, as at a stage-play enacted for their amusement.

There were others who preferred the exclusiveness of a separate table; among these two middle-aged men—one military, both new arrivals—who sat within earshot of Mr. and Mrs. Tregonell.

'That's a fascinating get-up, Belle,' pursued Leonard, proud of his wife's beauty, and not displeased at a few respectful glances from the men at the neighbouring table which that beauty had elicited. 'By-the-by, why shouldn't we go to the opera to-night? They do "Traviata;" none of your Wagner stuff, but one of the few operas a fellow *can* understand. It will cheer you up a bit.'

'Thank you, Leonard. You are very good to think of it; but I had rather not go to any place of amusement—this year.'

'That's rank rubbish, Belle. What can it matter—here, where nobody knows us? And do you suppose it can make any difference to my poor mother? Her sleep will be none the less tranquil.'

'I know that; but it pleases me to honour her memory. I will go to the opera as often as you like next year, Leonard.'

'You may go or stay away, so far as I'm concerned,' answered Leonard, with a sulky air. 'I only suggested the thing on your account. I hate their squalling.'

This was not the first time that Mr. Tregonell had shown the cloven foot during that prolonged honeymoon. He was not actually unkind to his wife. He indulged her fancies for the most part, even when they went counter to his; he would have loaded her with gifts, had she been willing to accept them; he was the kind of spouse who, in the estimation of the outside world, passes as a perfect husband—proud, fond, indulgent, lavish—just the kind of husband whom a sensuous, selfish woman would consider absolutely adorable from a practical standpoint; supplementing him, perhaps, with the ideal, in the person of a lover.

So far, Christabel's wedded life had gone smoothly; for in the measure of her sacrifice she had included obedience and duty after marriage. Yet there was not an hour in which she did not feel the utter want of sympathy between her and the man she had married—not a day in which she did not discover his inability to understand her, to think as she thought, to see as she saw. Religion, conscience, honour—for all these husband and wife had a different standard. That which was right to one was wrong to the other. Their sense of the beautiful, their estimation of art, were as wide apart as earth and heaven. How could any union prove happy—how could there be even that smooth peacefulness which blesses some passionless unions—when the husband and wife were of so different a clay? Long as Leonard had known and loved his cousin, he was no more at home with her than he would have been with Undine, or with that ivory image which Aphrodite warmed into life at the prayer of Pygmalion the sculptor.

More than once during these six weeks of matrimony Leonard had betrayed a jealous temper, which threatened evil in the future. His courtship had been one long struggle at self-repression. Marriage gave him back his liberty, and he used it on more than one occasion to sneer at his wife's former lover, or at her fidelity to a cancelled vow. Christabel had understood his meaning only too well; but she had heard him in a scornful silence which was more humiliating than any other form of reproof.

After that offer of the opera, Mr. Tregonell lapsed into silence. His subjects for conversation were not widely varied, and his present position, aloof from all sporting pursuits, and poorly provided with the London papers, reduced him almost to dumbness. Just now he was silent from temper, and went on sulkily with his dinner, pretending to be absorbed by consideration of the wines and dishes, most of which he pronounced abominable.

When he had finished his dinner, he took out his cigarette case, and went out on the balcony to smoke, leaving Christabel sitting alone at her little table.

The two Englishmen at the table in the next window were talking in a comfortable, genial kind of way, and in voices quite loud enough to be overheard by their immediate neighbours. The soldier-like man sat back to back with Christabel, and she could not avoid hearing the greater part of his conversation.

She heard with listless ears, neither understanding nor interested in understanding the drift of his talk—her mind far away in the home she had left, a desolate and ruined home, as it seemed to her, now that her aunt was dead. But by-and-by the sound of a too familiar name rivetted her attention.

'Angus Hamleigh, yes! I saw his name in the visitor's book. He was here last month—gone on to Italy,' said the soldier.

'You knew him?' asked the other.

'*Dans le temps.* I saw a good deal of him when he was about town.'

'Went a mucker, didn't he?'

'I believe he spent a good deal of money—but he never belonged to an out-and-out fast lot. Went in for art and and literature, and that kind of thing, don't you know? Garrick Club, behind the scenes at the swell theatres—Richmond and

Greenwich dinners—Maidenhead—Henley—lived in a houseboat one summer, men used to go down by the last train to moonlit suppers after the play. He had some very good ideas, and carried them out on a large scale—but he never dropped money on cards, or racing—rather looked down upon the amusements of the million. By-the-by, I was at a rather curious wedding just before I left London.'

'Whose?'

'Little Fishky's. The Colonel came up to time at last.'

'Fishky,' interrogated the civilian, vaguely.

'Don't you know Fishky, alias Psyche, the name by which Stella Mayne condescended to be known by her intimate friends during the run of "Cupid and Psyche.' Colonel Luscomb married her last week at St. George's, and I was at the wedding.'

'Rather feeble of him, wasn't it?' asked the civilian.

'Well, you see, he could hardly sink himself lower than he had done already by his infatuation for the lady. He knew that all his chances at the Horse Guards were gone; so if a plain gold ring could gratify a young person who had been surfeited with diamonds, why should our friend withhold that simple and inexpensive ornament? Whether the lady and gentleman will be any the happier for this rehabilitation of their domestic circumstances, is a question that can only be answered in the future. The wedding was decidedly queer.'

'In what way?'

'It was a case of vaulting ambition which o'er-leaps itself. The Colonel wanted a quiet wedding. I think he would have preferred the registrar's office—no church-going, or fuss of any kind—but the lady, to whom matrimony was a new idea, willed otherwise. So she decided that the nest in St. John's Wood was not spacious enough to accommodate the wedding guests. She sent her invitations far and wide, and ordered a *recherché* breakfast at an hotel in Brook Street. Of the sixty people she expected about fifteen appeared, and there was a rowdy air about those select few, male and female, which was by no means congenial to the broad glare of day. Night birds, every one—painted cheeks—dyed moustachios—tremulous hands—a foreshadowing of del. trem. in the very way some of them swallowed their champagne. I was sorry for Fishky, who looked lovely in her white satin frock and orange-blossoms, but who had a piteous droop about the corners of her lips, like a child whose birthday feast has gone wrong. I felt still sorrier for the Colonel—a proud man debased by low surroundings.'

'He will take her off the stage, I suppose,' suggested the other.

'Naturally, he will try to do so. He'll make a good fight for it, I dare say; but whether he can keep Fishky from the footlights is an open question. I know he's in debt, and I don't very clearly see how they are to live.'

'She is very fond of him, isn't she?'

'Yes, I believe so. She jilted Hamleigh, a man who worshipped her, to take up with Luscomb, so I suppose it was a case of real affection.'

'I was told that she was in very bad health—consumptive?'

'That sort of little person is always dying,' answered the other carelessly. It is a part of the *métier*—the Marguerite Gauthier, drooping lily kind of young woman. But I believe this one *is* sickly.'

'Christabel heard every word of this conversation, heard and understood for the first time that her renunciation of her lover had been useless—that the reparation she had deemed it his duty to make, was past making—that the woman to whose wounded character she had sacrificed her own happiness was false and unworthy. She had been fooled—betrayed by her own generous instincts—her own emotional impulses. It would have been better for her and for Angus if she had been more worldly-minded—less innocent of the knowledge of evil. She had blighted her own life, and perhaps his, for an imaginary good. Nothing had been gained to any one living by her sacrifice.

'I thought I was doing my duty,' she told herself helplessly, as she sat looking out at the dark water, above which the moon was rising in the cloudless purple of a southern night. 'Oh! how wicked that woman was to hide the truth from me—to let me sacrifice my love and my lover—knowing her own falsehood all the time. And now she is the wife of another man! How she must have laughed at my folly! I thought it was Angus who had deserted her, and that if I gave him up, his own honourable feeling would lead him to atone for that past wrong. And now I know that no good has been done—only infinite evil.'

She thought of Angus, a lonely wanderer on the face of the earth; jilted by the first woman he had loved, renounced by the second, with no close ties of kindred—uncared for and alone. It was hard for her to think of this, whose dearest hope had once been to devote her life to caring for him and cherishing him—prolonging that frail existence by the tender ministrations of a boundless love. She pictured him in his loneliness, careless of his health, wasting his brief remnant of life—reckless, hopeless, indifferent.

'God grant he may fall in love with some good woman, who will cherish him as I would have done,' was her unselfish prayer.

for she knew that domestic affection is the only spell that can prolong a fragile life.

It was a weak thing no doubt next morning, when she was passing through the hall of the hotel, to stop at the desk on which the visitors' book was kept, and to look back through the signatures of the last three weeks for that one familiar autograph which she had such faint chance of ever seeing again in the future. How boldly that one name seemed to stand out from the page; and even coming upon it after a deliberate search, what a thrill it sent through her veins! The signature was as firm as of old. She tried to think that this was an indication of health and strength—but later in the same day, when she was alone in her sitting-room, and her tea was brought to her by a German waiter—one of those superior men whom it is hard to think of as a menial—she ventured to ask a question.

'There was an English gentleman staying here about three weeks ago: a Mr. Hamleigh. Do you remember him?' she asked.

The waiter interrogated himself silently for half a minute, and then replied in the affirmative.

'Was he an invalid?'

'Not quite an invalid, Madame. He went out a little—but he did not seem robust. He never went to the opera—or to any public entertainment. He rode a little—and drove a little—and read a great deal. He was much fonder of books than most English gentlemen.'

'Do you know where he went when he left here?'

'He was going to the Italian lakes.'

Christabel asked no further question. It seemed to her a great privilege to have heard even so much as this. There was very little hope that in her road of life she would often come so nearly on her lost lover's footsteps. She was too wise to desire that they should ever meet face to face—that she, Leonard's wife, should ever again be moved by the magic of that voice, thrilled by the pathos of those dreamy eyes; but it was a privilege to hear something about him she had lost, to know what spot of earth held him, what skies looked down upon him.

CHAPTER XVII.

'I HAVE PUT MY DAYS AND DREAMS OUT OF MIND.'

It was the end of May, when Christabel and her husband went back to England and to Mount Royal. Leonard wanted to stay in London for the season, and to participate in the amusements and dissipation of that golden time; but this his wife most steadfastly refused. She would be guilty of no act which could imply want of respect for her beloved dead. She would not make her curtsey to her sovereign in her new character of a matron, or go into society, within the year of her aunt's death.

'You will be horribly moped in Cornwall,' remonstrated Leonard. 'Everything about the place will remind you of my poor mother. We shall be in the dolefuls all the year.'

'I would rather grieve for her than forget her,' answered Christabel. 'It is too easy to forget.'

'Well, you must have your own way, I suppose. You generally do,' retorted Leonard, churlishly; 'and, after having dragged me about a lot of mouldy old French towns, and made me look at churches, and Roman baths, and the sites of ancient circuses, until I hated the very name of antiquity, you will expect me to vegetate at Mount Royal for the next six months.'

'I don't see any reason why a quiet life should be mere vegetation,' said Christabel; 'but if you would prefer to spend part of the year in London I can stay at Mount Royal.'

'And get on uncommonly well without me,' cried Leonard. 'I perfectly comprehend your meaning. But I am not going in for that kind of thing. You and I must not offer the world another example of the semi-attached couple; or else people might begin to say you had married a man you did not care for.'

'I will try and make your life as agreeable as I can at the Manor, Leonard,' Christabel answered, with supreme equanimity —it was an aggravation to her husband that she so rarely lost her temper—'so long as you do not ask me to fill the house with visitors, or to do anything that might look like want of reverence for your mother's memory.'

Look!' ejaculated Leonard. What does it matter how things look? We both know that we are sorry for having lost her—that we shall miss her more or less every day of our lives —visitors or no visitors. However, you needn't invite any people. I can rub on with a little fishin' and boatin'.'

They went back to Mount Royal, where all things had gone as if by clockwork during their absence, under Miss Bridgeman's sage administration. To relieve her loneliness, Christabel had invited two of the younger sisters from Shepherd's Bush to spend the spring months at the Manor House—and these damsels—tall, vigorous, active—had revelled exceedingly in all the luxuries and pleasures of a rural life under the most advantageous circumstances. They had scoured the hills—had rifled the hedges of their abundant wild flowers—had made friends with all Christabel's chosen families in the surrounding cottages—had fallen in love with the curate who was doing duty at Minster and Forrabury—had been buffeted by the winds and tossed by the waves in many a delightful boating excursion—had climbed the rocky steeps of Tintagel so often that they seemed to know every stone of that ruined citadel—and now had gone home to Shepherd's Bush, their cheeks bright with country bloom, and their meagre trunks overshadowed by a gigantic hamper of country produce.

Christabel felt a bitter pang as the carriage drew up to the porch, and she saw the neat little figure in a black gown waiting to receive her—thinking of that tall and noble form which should have stood there—the welcoming arms which should have received her, rewarding and blessing her for her self-sacrifice. The sacrifice had been made, but death had swallowed up the blessing and reward; and in that intermediate land of slumber where the widow lay there could be no knowledge of gain—no satisfaction in the thought of her son's happiness: even granting that Leonard was supremely happy in his marriage, a fact which Christabel deemed open to doubt. No, there had been nothing gained, except that Diana Tregonell's last days had been full of peace—her one cherished hope realized on the very threshold of the tomb. Christabel tried to take comfort from this knowledge.

'If I had denied her to the last, if she had died with her wish ungratified, I think I should be still more sorry for her loss,' she told herself.

There was bitter pain in the return to a home where that one familiar figure had been the central point, the very axis of life. Jessie led the new Mrs. Tregonell into the panelled parlour, where every object was arranged just as in the old days; the tea-table on the left of the wide fireplace, the large low arm-chair and the book-table on the right. The room was bright with white and crimson may, azaleas, tea-roses.

'I thought it was best for you to get accustomed to the rooms without her,' said Jessie, in a low voice, as she placed Christabel in the widow's old chair, and helped to take off her hat and mantle, 'and I thought you would not like anything changed.'

'Not for worlds. The house is a part of her, in my mind. It was she who planned everything as it now is—just adding as many new things as were needful to brighten the old. I will never alter a detail unless I am absolutely obliged.'

'I am so thankful to hear you say that. Major Bree is coming to dinner. He wanted to be among the first to welcome you. I hope you don't mind my having told him he might come.'

'I shall be very glad to see him: he is a part of my old life here. I hope he is very well.'

'Splendid—the soul of activity and good temper. I can't tell you how good he was to my sisters—taking them about everywhere. I believe they both went away deeply in love with him; or at least, with their affections divided between him and Mr. Ponsonby.

Mr. Ponsonby was the curate, a bachelor, and of pleasing appearance.

Leonard had submitted reluctantly to the continued residence of Miss Bridgeman at Mount Royal. He had been for dismissing her, as a natural consequence of his mother's death; but here again Christabel had been firm.

'Jessie is my only intimate friend,' she said, 'and she is associated with every year of my girlhood. She will be no trouble to you, Leonard, and she will help me to save your money.'

This last argument had a softening effect. Mr. Tregonell knew that Jessie Bridgeman was a good manager. He had affected to despise her economies while it was his mother's purse which was spared; but now that the supplies were drawn from his own resources he was less disposed to be contemptuous of care in the administrator of his household.

Major Bree was in the drawing-room when Christabel came down dressed for dinner, looking delicately lovely in her flowing gown of soft dull black, with white flowers and white crape about her neck. The Major's cheerful presence did much to help Mr. Tregonell and his wife through that first dinner at Mount Royal. He had so many small local events to tell them about, news too insignificant to be recorded in Jessie's letters, but not without interest for Christabel, who loved place and people. Then after dinner he begged his hostess to play, declaring that he had not heard any good music during her absence, and Christabel, who had cultivated her musical talents assiduously in every interval of loneliness and leisure which had occurred in the course of her bridal tour, was delighted to play to a listener who could understand and appreciate the loftiest flights in harmony.

The Major was struck with the improvement in her style She had always played sweetly, but not with this breadth and power.

'You must have worked very hard in these last few months,' he said.

'Yes, I made the best of every opportunity. I had some lessons from a very clever German professor at Nice. Music kept me from brooding on my loss,' she added, in a low voice.

'I hope you will not grow less industrious now you have come home,' said the Major. 'Most women give Mozart and Beethoven to the winds when they marry, shut up their piano altogether, or at most aspire to play a waltz for their children's dancing.

'I shall not be one of those. Music will be my chief pursuit—now.'

The Major felt that although this was a very proper state of things from an artistic point of view, it argued hardly so well for the chances of matrimonial bliss. That need of a pursuit after marriage indicated a certain emptiness in the existence of the wife. A life closed and rounded in the narrow circle of a wedding ring hardly leaves room for the assiduous study of art.

And now began for Christabel a life which seemed to her to be in some wise a piece of mechanism, an automatic performance of daily recurring duties, an hourly submission to society which had no charm for her—a life which would have hung as heavily upon her spirit as the joyless monotony of a convict prison, had it not been for the richness of her own mental resources, and her love of the country in which she lived. She could not be altogether unhappy roaming with her old friend Jessie over those wild romantic hills, or facing the might of that tremendous ocean, grand and somewhat awful even in its calmest aspect. Nor was she unhappy, seated in her own snug morning-room among the books she loved—books which were always opening new worlds of thought and wonder, books of such inexhaustible interest that she was often inclined to give way to absolute despair at the idea of how much of this world's wisdom must remain unexplored even at the end of a long life. De Quincey has shown by figures that not the hardest reader can read half the good old books that are worth reading; to say nothing of those new books daily claiming to be read.

No, for a thoroughly intellectual woman, loving music, loving the country, tender and benevolent to the poor, such a life as Christabel was called upon to lead in this first year of marriage could not be altogether unhappy. Here were two people joined by the strongest of all human ties, and yet utterly unsympathetic; but they were not always in each other's company, and when they were together the wife did her best to appear contented with her lot, and to make life agreeable to her husband. She was more punctilious in the performance of every duty she owed him than she would have been had she loved him better. She never forgot that his welfare was a charge which she had taken upon herself to please the kinswoman to whom she owed so much. The debt was all the more sacred since she to whom it was due had passed away to the land where there is no knowledge of earthly conduct.

The glory of summer grew and faded, the everlasting hills changed with all the varying lights and shadows of autumn and winter; and in the tender early spring, when all the trees were budding, and the hawthorn hedges were unfolding crinkly green leaves among the brown, Christabel's heart melted with the new strange emotion of maternal love. A son was born to the lord of the manor; and while all Boscastle rejoiced at this important addition to the population, Christabel's pale face shone with a new radiance, as the baby-face looked up at her from the pillow by her side—eyes clear and star-like, with a dreamy, far-away gaze, which was almost more lovely than the recognizing looks of older eyes—a being hardly sentient of the things of earth, but bright with memories of the spirit world.

The advent of this baby-boy gave a new impulse to Christabel's life. She gave herself up to these new cares and duties with intense devotion; and for the next six months of her life was so entirely engrossed by her child that Leonard considered himself neglected. She deferred her presentation at Court till the next season, and Leonard was compelled to be satisfied with an occasional brief holiday in London, during which he naturally relapsed into the habits of his bachelor days—dined and gamed at the old clubs, and went about everywhere with his friend and ally, Jack Vandeleur.

Christabel had been married two years, and her boy was a year old, when she went back to the old house in Bolton Row with her husband, to enjoy her second season of fashionable pleasures. How hard it was to return, under such altered circumstances, to the rooms in which she had been so happy—to see everything unchanged except her own life. The very chairs and tables seemed to be associated with old joys, old griefs. All the sharp agony of that bitter day on which she had made up her mind to renounce Angus Hamleigh came back to her as she looked round the room in which the pain had been suffered. The flavour of old memories was mixed with all the enjoyments of the present. The music she heard this year was the same music they two had heard together. And here was this smiling Park, all green leaves and sunlight filled with this seeming frivolous crowd; in almost every detail the scene they two had contemplated, amused and philosophical, four years ago.

The friends who called on her and invited her now, were the same people among whom she had visited during her first season. People who had been enraptured at her engagement to Mr. Hamleigh were equally delighted at her marriage with her cousin, or at least said so; albeit, more than one astute matron drove away from Bolton Row sighing over the folly of marriage between first cousins, and marvelling that Christabel's baby was not deaf, blind, or idiotic.

Among other old acquaintances, young Mrs. Tregonell met the Dowager Lady Cumberbridge, at a great dinner, more Medusa-like than ever, in a curly auburn wig after Madame de Montespan, and a diamond coronet. Christabel shrank from the too-well-remembered figure with a faint shudder; but Lady Cumberbridge swooped upon her like an elderly hawk, when the ladies were on their way back to the drawing-room, and insisted upon being friendly.

'My dear child, where have you been hiding yourself all these years?' she exclaimed, in her fine baritone. 'I saw your marriage in the papers, and your poor aunt's death; and I was expecting to meet you and your husband in society last season. You didn't come to town? A baby, I suppose? Just so! Those horrid babies! In the coming century there will be some better arrangement for carrying on the species. How well you are looking, and your husband is positively charming. He sat next me at dinner, and we were friends in a moment. How proud he is of you! It is quite touching to see a man so devoted to his wife; and now'—they were in the subdued light of the drawing-room by this time, light judiciously tempered by ruby-coloured Venetian glass—'now tell me all about my poor friend. Was she long ill?'

And, with a ghoulish interest in horrors, the dowager prepared herself for a detailed narration of Mrs. Tregonell's last illness; but Christabel could only falter out a few brief sentences. Even now she could hardly speak of her aunt without tears; and it was painful to talk of her to this worldly dowager, with keen eyes glittering under penthouse brows, and a hard, eager mouth.

In all that London season, Christabel only once heard her old lover's name, carelessly mentioned at a dinner party. He was talked of as a guest at some diplomatic dinner at St. Petersburg, early in the year.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'AND PALE FROM THE PAST WE DRAW NIGH THEE.'

It was October, and the chestnut leaves were falling slowly and heavily in the park at Mount Royal, the oaks upon the hill side were faintly tinged with bronze and gold, while the purple bloom of the heather and the yellow flower of the gorze were seen in rarer patches amidst the sober tints of autumn. It was the time at which to some eyes this Cornish coast was most lovely, with a subdued poetic loveliness—a dreamy beauty touched with tender melancholy.

Mount Royal was delightful at this season. Liberal fires in all the rooms filled the old oak-panelled house with a glow of colour, and a sense of ever-present warmth that was very comfortable after the sharpness of October breezes. Those greenhouses and hothouses, which had been for so many years Mrs. Tregonell's perpetual care, now disgorged their choicest contents. Fragile white and yellow asters, fairy-like ferns, Dijon roses, lilies of the valley, stephanotis, mignonette, and Cape jasmine filled the rooms with perfume. Modern blinds of diapered crimson and grey subdued the light of those heavily mullioned windows which had been originally designed with a view to strength and architectual effect, rather than to the admission of the greatest possible amount of daylight. The house at this season of the year seemed made for warmth, so thick the walls, so heavily curtained the windows; just as in the height of summer it seemed made for coolness. Christabel had respected all her aunt's ideas and prejudices: nothing had been changed since Mrs. Tregonell's death—save for that one sad fact that she was gone. The noble matronly figure, the handsome face, the kindly smile were missing from the house where the widow had so long reigned, an imperious but a beneficent mistress—having her own way in all things, but always considerate of other people's happiness and comfort.

Mr. Tregonell was inclined to be angry with his wife sometimes for her religious adherence to her aunt's principles and opinions in things great and small.

'You are given over body and soul to my poor mother's fads,' he said. 'If it had not been for you I should have turned the house out of windows when she was gone—got rid of all the worm-eaten furniture, broken out new windows, and let in more light. One feels half asleep in a house where there is nothing but shadow and the scent of hothouse flowers. I should have given *carte blanche* to some London man—the fellow who writes verses and who invented the storks and sunflower style of decoration—and have let him refurnish the saloon and music-room, pitch out a library which nobody reads, and substitute half a dozen dwarf book-cases in gold and ebony, filled with brightly bound books, and with Japanese jars and bottles on the top of them to give life and colour to the oak panelling. I hate a gloomy house.'

'Oh, Leonard, you surely would not call Mount Royal gloomy.'

'But I do: I hate a house that smells of one's ancestors.'

'Just now you objected to the scent of the flowers.'

'You are always catching me up—there was never such a woman to argue—but I mean what I say. The smell is a combination of stephanotis and old bones. I wish you would let me build you a villa at Torquay or Dartmouth. I think I should prefer Dartmouth: it's a better place for yachting.'

'You are very kind, but I would rather live at Mount Royal than anywhere else. Remember I was brought up here.'

'A reason for your being heartily sick of the house—as I am. But I suppose in your case there are associations—sentimental associations.'

'The house is filled with memories of my second mother!'

'Yes—and there are other memories—associations which you love to nurse and brood upon. I think I know all about it—can read up your feelings to a nicety.'

'You can think and say what you please, Leonard,' she answered, looking at him with unaltered calmness, 'but you will never make me disown my love of this place and its surroundings. You will never make me ashamed of being fond of the home in which I have spent my life.'

'I begin to think there is very little shame in you,' Leonard muttered to himself, as he walked away.

He had said many bitter words to his wife—had aimed many a venomed arrow at her breast—but he had never made her blush, and he had never made her cry. There were times when dull hopeless anger consumed him—anger against her—against nature—against Fate—and when his only relief was to be found in harsh and bitter speech, in dark and sullen looks. It would have been a greater relief to him if his shots had gone home—if his brutality had elicited any sign of distress. But in this respect Christabel was heroic. She who had never harboured an ungenerous thought was moved only to a cold calm scorn by the unjust and ungenerous conduct of her husband. Her contempt was too thorough for the possibility of resentment. Once, and once only, she attempted to reason with a fool in his folly.

'Why do you make these unkind speeches, Leonard?' she asked, looking at him with those calm eyes before which his were apt to waver and look downward, hardly able to endure that steady gaze. 'Why are you always harping upon the past—as if it were an offence against you. Is there anything that you have to complain of in my conduct—have I given you any cause for anger?'

'Oh, no, none. You are simply perfect as a wife—everybody says so—and in the multitude of counsellors, you know. But it is just possible for perfection to be a trifle cold and unapproachable—to keep a man at arm's length—and to have an ever-present air of living in the past which is galling to a husband who would like—well—a little less amiability, and a little more affection. By Heaven, I wouldn't mind my wife being a devil, if I knew she was fond of me. A spitfire, who would kiss me one minute and claw me the next, would be better than the calm superiority which is always looking over my head.'

'Leonard, I don't think I have been wanting in affection. You have done a great deal to repel my liking—yes—since you force me to speak plainly—you have made my duty as a wife more difficult than it need have been. But, have I ever forgotten that you are my husband, and the father of my child? Is there any act of my life which has denied or made light of your authority? When you asked me to marry you I kept no secrets from you: I was perfectly frank.'

'Devilish frank,' muttered Leonard.

'You knew that I could not feel for you as I had felt for another. These things can come only once in a lifetime. You were content to accept my affection—my obedience—knowing this. Why do you make what I told you then a reproach against me now!'

He could not dispute the justice of this reproof.

'Well, Christabel, I was wrong, I suppose. It would have been more gentlemanlike to hold my tongue. I ought to know that your first girlish fancy is a thing of the past—altogether gone and done with. It was idiotic to harp upon that worn-out string, wasn't it?' he asked, laughing awkwardly: but when a man feels savage he must hit out at some one.'

This was the only occasion on which husband and wife had ever spoken plainly of the past; but Leonard let fly those venomed arrows of his on the smallest provocation. He could not forget that his wife had loved another man better than she had ever loved or even pretended to love him. It was her candour which he felt most keenly. Had she been willing to play the hypocrite, to pretend a little, he would have been ever so much better pleased. To the outside world, even to that narrow world which encircles an old family seat in the depths of the country, Mr. and Mrs. Tregonell appeared a happy couple, whose union was the most natural thing in the world, yet not without a touch of that romance which elevates and idealizes a marriage.

Were they not brought up under the same roof, boy and girl together, like, and yet not like, brother and sister. How inevitable that they must become devotedly attached. That little episode of Christabel's engagement to another man counted for nothing. She was so young—had never questioned her own heart. Her true love was away—and she was flattered by the attention of a man of the world like Angus Hamleigh—and so, and so—almost unawares, perhaps, she allowed herself to be engaged to him, little knowing the real bent of his character and the gulf into which she was about to plunge: for in the neighbourhood of Mount Royal it was believed that a man who had once lived as Mr. Hamleigh had lived was a soul lost for ever, a creature given over to ruin in this world and the next. There was no hopefulness in the local mind for the after career of such an offender.

At this autumn season, when Mount Royal was filled with visitors, all intent upon taking life pleasantly, it would have been impossible for a life to seem more prosperous and happy to the outward eye than that of Christabel Tregonell. The centre of a friendly circle, the ornament of a picturesque and perfectly appointed house, the mother of a lovely boy whom she worshipped with the overweening love of a young mother for her firstborn, admired, beloved by all her little world, with a husband who was proud of her and indulgent to her—who could deny that Mrs. Tregonell was a person to be envied.

Mrs. Fairfax Torrington, a widow, with a troublesome son, and a limited income—an income whose narrow boundary she was continually overstepping—told her hostess as much one morning when the men were all out on the hills in the rain, and the women made a wide circle round the library fire, some of them intent upon crewel work, others not even pretending to be industrious, the faithful Randie lying at his mistress's feet, as she sat in her favourite chair by the old carved chimney-piece—the chair which had been her aunt Diana's for so many peaceful years.

'There is a calmness—an assured tranquility about your life which makes me hideously envious,' said Mrs. Fairfax Torrington, waving the Society paper which she had been using as a screen against the fire, after having read the raciest of its paragraphs aloud, and pretended to be sorry for the dear friends at whom the censor's airy shafts were aimed. 'I have stayed with duchesses and with millionaires—but I never envied either. The duchess is always dragged to death by the innumerable claims upon her time, her money, and her atttention. Her life is very little better than the fate of that unfortunate person who stabbed one of the French Kings—forty wild horses pulling forty different ways. It doesn't make it much better because the horses are called by pretty names, don't you know. Court, friends, flower-shows, balls, church, opera, Ascot, fancy fairs, seat in Scotland, place in Yorkshire, Baden, Monaco. It is the pull that wears one out, the dreadful longing to be allowed to sit in one's own room by one's own fire, and rest. I know what it is in my small way, so I have always rather pitied duchesses. At a millionaire's house one is inevitably bored. There is an insufferable glare and glitter of money in everything, unpleasantly accentuated by an occasional blot of absolute meanness. No, Mrs. Tregonell,' pursued the agreeable rattle, I don't envy duchesses or millionaires' wives : but your existence seems to me utterly enviable, so tranquil and easy a life, in such a perfect house, with the ability to take a plunge into the London vortex whenever you like, or to stay at home if you prefer it, a charming husband, and an ideal baby, and above all that sweet equable temperament of yours, which would make life easy under much harder circumstances. Don't you agree with me, now, Miss Bridgeman?'

'I always agree with clever people,' answered Jessie, calmly.

Christabel went on with her work, a quiet smile upon her beautiful lips.

Mrs. Torrington was one of those gushing persons to whom there was no higher bliss, after eating and drinking, than the indulgence in that lively monologue which she called conversation, and a happy facility for which rendered her, in her own opinion, an acquisition in any country-house.

'The general run of people are so dull,' she would remark in her confidential moments ; 'there are so few who can talk, without being disgustingly egotistical. Most people's idea of conversation is autobiography in instalments. I have always been liked for my high spirits and flow of conversation.'

High spirits at forty-five are apt to pall, unless accompanied by the rare gift of wit. Mrs. Torrington was not witty, but she had read a good deal of light literature, kept a commonplace book, and had gone through life believing herself a Sheridan or a Sidney Smith, in petticoats.

'A woman's wit is like dancing in fetters,' she complained sometimes : 'there are so many things one must not say!'

Christabel was more than content that her acquaintance should envy her. She wished to be thought happy. She had never for a moment posed as victim or martyr. In good faith, and with steady purpose of well-doing, she had taken upon herself the duties of a wife, and she meant to fulfil them to the uttermost.

'There shall be no shortcoming on my side,' she said to herself. 'If we cannot live peaceably and happily together it shall not be my fault. If Leonard will not let me respect him as a husband, I can still honour him as my boy's father.'

In these days of fashionable agnosticism and hysterical devotion—when there is hardly any middle path between life spent in church and church-work and the open avowal of unbelief—something must be said in favour of that old-fashioned sober religious feeling which enabled Christabel Tregonell to walk steadfastly along the difficult way, her mind possessed with the ever-present belief in a Righteous Judge who saw all her acts and knew all her thoughts.

She studied her husband's pleasure in all things—yielding to him upon every point in which principle was not at stake. The house was full of friends of his choosing—not one among those guests, in spite of their surface pleasantness, being congenial to a mind so simple and unworldly, so straight and thorough, as that of Christabel Tregonell. Without Jessie Bridgeman, Mrs. Tregonell would have been companionless in a house full of people. The vivacious widow, the slangy young ladies, with a marked taste for billiards and shooting parties, and an undisguised preference for masculine society, thought their hostess behind the age. It was obvious that she was better informed than they, had been more carefully educated, played better, sang better, was more elegant and refined in every thought, and look, and gesture; but in spite of all these advantages, or perhaps on account of them, she was 'slow:' not an easy person to get on with. Her gowns were simply perfect—but she had no *chic*. *Nous autres*, with ever so much less money to spend on our toilettes, look more striking—stand out better from the ruck. An artificial rose here—a rag of old lace—a fan—a vivid ribbon in the maze of our hair—and the effect catches every eye—while poor Mrs. Tregonell, with her lovely complexion, and a gown that is obviously Parisian, is comparatively nowhere.

This is what the Miss Vandeleurs—old campaigners—told each other as they dressed for dinner, on the second day after their arrival at Mount Royal. Captain Vandeleur—otherwise Poker Vandeleur, from a supposed natural genius for that intellectual game—was Mr. Tregonell's old friend and travelling companion. They had shared a good deal of sport, and not a little hardship in the Rockies—had fished, and shot, and toboggined in Canada—had played euchre in San Francisco, and monte in Mexico—and, in a word, were bound together by memories and tastes in common. Captain Vandeleur, like Byron's Corsair, had one virtue amidst many shortcomings. He was an affectionate brother, always glad to do a good turn to his sisters—who lived with a shabby old half-pay father, in one of the shabbiest streets in the debatable land between Pimlico and Chelsea—by courtesy, South Belgravia. Captain Vandeleur rarely had it in his power to do much for his sisters himself—a five-pound note at Christmas or a bonnet at Midsummer was perhaps the furthest stretch of his personal benevolence—but he was piously fraternal in his readiness to victimize his dearest friend for the benefit of Dopsy and Mopsy—these being the poetic pet names devised to mitigate the dignity of the baptismal Adolphine and Margaret. When Jack Vandeleur had a pigeon to pluck, he always contrived that Dopsy and Mopsy should get a few of the feathers. He did not take his friends home to the shabby little ten-roomed house in South Belgravia—such a nest would have too obviously indicated his affinity to the hawk tribe—but he devised some means of bringing Mopsy and Dopsy and his married friends together. A box at the Opera—stalls for the last burlesque—a drag for Epsom or Ascot—or even afternoon tea at Hurlingham—and the thing was done. The Miss Vandeleurs never failed to improve the occasion. They had a genius for making their little wants known, and getting them supplied. The number of their gloves—the only shop in London at which wearable gloves could be bought—how naïvely these favourite themes for girlish converse dropped from their cherry lips. Sunshades, fans, lace, flowers, perfumery—all these luxuries of the toilet were for the most part supplied to Dopsy and Mopsy from this fortuitous source.

Some pigeons lent themselves more kindly to the plucking than others; and the Miss Vandeleurs had long ago discovered that it was not the wealthiest men who were most lavish. Given a gentleman with a settled estate of fourteen thousand a year, and the probabilities were that he would not rise above a dozen gloves or a couple of bouquets. It was the simple youth who had just come into five or ten thousand, and had nothing but the workhouse ahead of him when that was gone, who spent his money most freely. It is only the man who is steadfastly intent upon ruining himself, who ever quite comes up to the feminine idea of generosity. The spendthrift, during his brief season of fortune, leads a charmed life. For him it is hardly a question whether gloves cost five or ten shillings a pair—whether stephanotis is in or out of season. He offers his tribute to beauty without any base scruples of economy. What does it matter to him whether ruin comes a few months earlier by reason of this lavish liberality, seeing that the ultimate result is inevitable.

With the Miss Vandeleurs Leonard Tregonell ranked as an old friend. They had met him at theatres and races; they had been invited to little dinners at which he was host. Jack Vandeleur had a special genius for ordering a dinner, and for acting as guide to a man who liked dining in the highways and byways of London; it being an understood thing that Captain Vandeleur's professional position as counsellor exempted him for any share in the reckoning. Under his fraternal protection, Dopsy and Mopsy had dined snugly in all manner of foreign restaurants, and had eaten and drunk their fill at Mr. Tregonell's expense. They were both gourmands, and they were not ashamed of enjoying the pleasures of the table. It seemed to them that the class of men who could not endure to see a woman eat had departed with Byron, and Bulwer, and D'Orsay, and De Musset. A new race had arisen, which likes a 'jolly' girl who can appreciate a *recherché* dinner, and knows the difference between good and bad wine.

Mr. Tregonell did not yield himself up a victim to the fascinations of either Dopsy or Mopsy. He had seen too much of that class of beauty during his London experiences, to be caught by the auricomous tangles of one or the flaxen fringe of the other. He talked of them to their brother as nice girls, with no nonsense about them ; he gave them gloves, and dinners, and stalls for 'Madame Angot ;' but his appreciation took no higher form.

'It would have been a fine thing for one of you if you could have hooked him,' said their brother, as he smoked a final pipe between midnight and morning, in the untidy little drawing-room in South Belgravia, after an evening with Chaumont. He's a heavy swell in Cornwall, I can tell you. Plenty of money—fine old place. But there's a girl down there he's sweet upon—a cousin. He's very close ; but I caught him kissing and crying over her photograph one night in the Rockies—when our rations had run short, and two of our horses gone dead, and our best guide was down with ague, and there was an idea that we'd lost our track, and should never see England again. That's the only time I ever saw Tregonell sentimental. "I'm not afraid of death," he said, "but I should like to live to see home again, for her sake ;" and he showed me the photo—a sweet, fresh, young face, smiling at us with a look of home and home-affection, and we poor beggars not knowing if we she should ever see a woman's face again.

'If you knew he was in love with his cousin, what's the use of talking about his marrying us?' asked Mopsy petulantly, speaking of herself and her sister as if they were a firm.

'Oh, there's no knowing, answered Jack, coolly as he puffed at his meerschaum. 'A man may change his mind. Girls with your experience ought to be able to twist a fellow round your little finger. But though you're deuced keen at getting things out of men, you're uncommonly slow at bringing down your bird.'

'Look at our surroundings,' said Dopsy bitterly. 'Could we ever dare to bring a man here ; and it is in her own home that a man gets fond of a girl.'

'Well, a fellow would have to be very far gone to stand this,' Captain Vandeleur admitted, with a shrug of his shoulders, as he glanced round the room, with its blotchy paper, and smoky ceiling, its tawdry chandelier, and dilapidated furniture, flabby faded covers to chairs and sofa, side-table piled with shabby books and accumulated newspapers, the half-pay father's canes and umbrellas in the corner, his ancient slippers by the fender, his easy-chair, with its morocco cove indented with the greasy imprint of his venerable shoulders, and over all the rank odours of yesterday's dinner and stale tobacco-smoke

'A man in the last stage of spooniness will stand anything—

you remember the opening chapter of "Wilhelm Meister?" said Captain Jack, meditatively—'but he'd need be very far gone to stand *this*,' he repeated, with conviction.

Six months after this conversation, Mopsy read to Dopsy the announcement of Mr. Tregonell's marriage with the Cornish cousin.

'We shall never see any more of him, you may depend,' said Dopsy, with the air of pronouncing an elegy on the ingratitude of man. But she was wrong, for two years later Leonard Tregonell was knocking about town again, in the height of the season, with Poker Vandeleur, and the course of his diversions included a little dinner given to Dopsy and Mopsy at a choice Italian restaurateur's not very far from South Belgravia.

They both made themselves as agreeable as in them lay. He was married. All matrimonial hopes in that quarter were blighted. But marriage need not prevent his giving them dinners and stalls for the play, or being a serviceable friend to their brother.

'Poor Jack's friends are his only reliable income,' said Mopsy. 'He had need hold them fast.'

Mopsy put on her lively Madame Chaumont manner, and tried to amuse the Benedict. Dopsy was graver, and talked to him about his wife.

'She must be very sweet,' she said, 'from Jack's account of her.'

'Why, he's never seen her,' exclaimed Mr. Tregonell, looking puzzled.

'No; but you showed him her photograph once in the Rockies. Jack never forgot it.'

Leonard was pleased at this tribute to his good taste.

'She's the loveliest woman I ever saw, though she is my wife, he said; 'and I'm not ashamed to say I think so.'

'How I should like to know her,' sighed Dopsy; 'but I'm afraid she seldom comes to London.'

'That makes no difference,' answered Leonard, warmed into exceptional good humour by the soft influences of Italian cookery and Italian wines. 'Why should not you both come to Mount Royal? I want Jack to come for the shooting. He can bring you, and you'll be able to amuse my wife, while he and I are out on the hills.'

'It would be quite too lovely, and we should like it of all things; but do you think Mrs. Tregonell would be to get on with us?' asked Dopsy, diffidently.

It was not often she and her sister were asked to country houses. They were both fluttered at the idea, and turned their thoughts inward for a mental review of their wardrobes

'We *could* do it,' decided Mopsy, 'with a little help from Jack.'

Nothing more was said about the visit that night, but a month later, when Leonard had gone back to Mount Royal, a courteous letter from Mrs. Tregonell to Miss Vandeleur confirmed the Squire's invitation, and the two set out for the West of England under their brother's wing, rejoicing at this stroke of good luck. Christabel had been told that they were nice girls, just the kind of girls to be useful in a country-house—girls who had very few opportunities of enjoying life, and to whom any kindness would be charity—and she had done her husband's bidding without an objection of any kind. But when the two damsels appeared at Mount Royal tightly sheathed in sage-green merino, with limp little capes on their shoulders, and picturesque hats upon picturesque heads of hair, Mrs. Tregonell's heart failed her at the idea of a month spent in such company. Without caring a straw for art, without knowing more of modern poetry than the names of the poets and the covers of their books, Mopsy and Dopsy had been shrewd enough to discover that for young women with narrow means the æsthetic style of dress was by far the safest fashion. Stuff might do duty for silk—a sunflower, if it were only big enough, might make as startling an effect as a blaze of diamonds—a rag of limp tulle or muslin serve instead of costly lace—hair worn after the ideal suffice instead of expensive headgear, and home dressmaking pass current for originality. Christabel speedily found, however, that these damsels were not exacting in the matter of attention from herself. So long as they were allowed to be with the men they were happy. In the billiard-room, or the tennis-court, in the old Tudor hall, which was Leonard's favourite *tabagie*, in the saddle-room, or the stable-yard, on the hills, or on the sea, wherever the men would suffer their presence, Dopsy and Mopsy were charmed to be. On those rare occasions when the out-of-door party was made up without them they sat about the drawing-room in hopeless, helpless idleness—turning over yesterday's London papers, or stumbling through German waltzes on the iron-framed Kirkman grand, which had been Leonard's birthday gift to his wife. At their worst the Miss Vandeleurs gave Christabel very little trouble, for they felt curiously shy in her society. She was not of their world. They had not one thought or one taste in common. Mrs. Torrington, who insisted upon taking her hostess under her wing, was a much more troublesome person. The Vandeleur girls helped to amuse Leonard, who laughed at their slang and their mannishness, and who liked the sound of girlish voices in the house—albeit those voices were loud and vulgar. They made themselves particularly agreeable to Jessie Bridgeman, who declared that she took the keenest interest in them—as natural curiosities.

'Why should we pore over moths and zoophytes, and puzzle our brains with long Greek and Latin names,' demanded Jessie, 'when our own species affords an inexhaustible variety of creatures, all infinitely interesting? These Vandeleur girls are as new to me as if they had dropped from Mars or Saturn.'

Life, therefore, to all outward seeming, went very pleasantly at Mount Royal. A perfectly appointed house in which money is spent lavishly can hardly fail to be agreeable to those casual inmates who have nothing to do with its maintenance. To Dopsy and Mopsy Mount Royal was a terrestrial paradise. They had never imagined an existence so entirely blissful. This perfumed atmosphere—this unfailing procession of luxurious meals—no cold mutton to hang on hand—no beggarly mutation from bacon to bloater and bloater to bacon at breakfast-time—no wolf at the door.

'To think that money can make all this difference,' exclaimed Mopsy, as she sat with Dopsy on a heather-covered knoll waiting for the shooters to join them at luncheon, while the servants grouped themselves respectfully a little way off with the break and horses. 'Won't it be too dreadful to have to go home again?'.

'Loathsome!' said Dopsy, whose conversational strength consisted in the liberal use of about half-a-dozen vigorous epithets. 'I wish there were some rich young men staying here, that one might get a chance of promotion.'

'Rich men never marry poor girls,' answered Mopsy, dejectedly, 'unless the girl is a famous beauty or a favourite actress. You and I are nothing. Heaven only knows what is to become of us when the pater dies. Jack will never be able to give us free quarters. We shall have to go out as shop girls. We're a great deal too ignorant for governesses.'

'I shall go on the stage,' said Dopsy, with decision. 'I may not be handsome—but I can sing in tune, and my feet and ankles have always been my strong point. All the rest is leather and prunella, as Shakespeare says.'

'I shall engage myself to Spiers and Pond,' said Mopsy. 'It must be a more lively life, and doesn't require either voice or ankles—which I'—rather vindictively—'do not possess. Of course Jack won't like it—but I can't help that.'

Thus, in the face of all that is loveliest and most poetical in Nature—the dreamy moorland—the distant sea—the Lion-rock with the afternoon sunshine on it—the blue boundless sky—and one far-away sail, silvered with light, standing out against the low dark line of Lundy Island—debated Mopsy and Dopsy, waiting with keen appetites for the game pasty, and the welcome bottle or two of Moët, which they were to share with the sportsmen.

While these damsels thus beguiled the autumn afternoon, Christabel and Jessie had sallied out alone for one of their old rambles; such a solitary walk as had been their delight in the careless long ago, before ever passionate love, and sorrow, his handmaiden, came to Mount Royal.

Mrs. Torrington and three other guests had left that morning; the Vandeleurs, and Reginald Montagu, a free and easy little War-office clerk, were now the only visitors at Mount Royal, and Mrs. Tregonell was free to lead her own life—so with Jessie and Randie for company, she started at noontide for Tintagel. She could never weary of the walk by the cliffs—or even of the quiet country road with its blossoming hedgerows and boundless outlook. Every step of the way, every tint on field or meadow, every change in sky and sea was familiar to her, but she loved them all.

They had loitered in their ramble by the cliffs, talking a good deal of the past, for Jessie was now the only listener to whom Christabel could freely open her heart, and she loved to talk with her of the days that were gone, and of her first lover. Of their love and of their parting she never spoke—to talk of those things might have seemed treason in the wedded wife—but she loved to talk of the man himself—of his opinions, his ideas, the stories he had told them in their many rambles—his creed, his dreams—speaking of him always as 'Mr. Hamleigh,' and just as she might have spoken of any clever and intimate friend, lost to her, through adverse circumstance, for ever. It is hardly likely, since they talked of him so often when they were alone; that they spoke of him more on this day than usual: but it seemed to them afterwards as if they had done so—and as if their conversation in somewise forecast that which was to happen before yonder sun had dipped behind the wave.

They climbed the castle hill, and seated themselves on a low fragment of wall with their faces seaward. There was a lovely light on the sea, scarcely a breath of wind to curl the edges of the long waves which rolled slowly in and slid over the dark rocks in shining slabs of emerald-tinted water. Here and there deep purple patches showed where the sea-weed grew thickest, and here and there the dark outline of a convocation of shags stood out sharply above the crest of a rock.

'It was on just such a day that we first brought Mr. Hamleigh to this place,' said Christabel.

'Yes, our Cornish autumns are almost always lovely, and this year the weather is particularly mild,' answered Jessie, in her matter-of-fact way. She always put on this air when she saw Christabel drifting into dangerous feeling. 'I shouldn't wonder if we were to have a second crop of strawberries this year.'

'Do you remember how we talked of Tristan and Iseult—poor Iseult?'

'Poor Marc, I think.'

'Marc? One can't pity *him*. He was an ingrate and a coward.'

'He was a man and a husband,' retorted Jessie; 'and he seems to have been badly treated all round.'

'Whither does he wander now?' said Christabel, softly repeating lines learnt long ago.

'Haply in his dreams the wind
Wafts him here and lets him find
The lovely orphan child again,
  In her castle by the coast;
The youngest fairest chatelaine,
  That this realm of France can boast,
Our snowdrop by the Atlantic sea,
Iseult of Brittany.'

'Poor Iseult of the White Hand,' said a voice at Christabel's shoulder, 'after all was not her lot the saddest—had not she the best claim to our pity?'

Christabel started, turned, and she and Angus Hamleigh looked in each other's faces in the clear bright light. It was over four years since they had parted, tenderly, fondly, as plighted husband and wife, locked in each other's arms, promising each other speedy reunion, ineffably happy in their assurance of a future to be spent together: and now they met with pale cheeks, and lips dressed in a society smile—eyes—to which tears would have been a glad relief—assuming a careless astonishment.

'You here, Mr. Hamleigh!' cried Jessie, seeing Christabel's lips quiver dumbly, as if in the vain attempt at words, and rushing to the rescue. 'We were told you were in Russia.'

'I have been in Russia. I spent last winter at Petersburg—the only place where caviare and Adelina Patti are to be enjoyed in perfection—and I spent a good deal of this summer that is just gone in the Caucasus.'

'How nice!' exclaimed Jessie, as if he had been talking of Buxton or Malvern. 'And did you really enjoy it?'

'Immensely. All I ever saw in Switzerland is as nothing compared with the gloomy grandeur of that mighty semicircle of mountain peaks, of which Elburz, the shining mountain, the throne of Ormuzd, occupies the centre.'

'And how do you happen to be here—on this insignificant mound?' asked Jessie.

'Tintagel's surge-beat hill can never seem insignificant to me. National poetry has peopled it—while the Caucasus is only a desert.'

'Are you touring?'

'No, I am staying with the Vicar of Trevena. He is an old friend of my father's: they were college chums; and Mr. Carlyon is always kind to me.'

Mr. Carlyon was a new vicar, who had come to Trevena within the last two years.

'Shall you stay long?' asked Christabel, in tones which had a curiously flat sound, as of a voice produced by mechanism.

'I think not. It is a delicious place to stay at, but——'

'A little of it goes a long way,' said Jessie.

'You have not quite anticipated my sentiments, Miss Bridgeman. I was going to say that unfortunately for me I have engagements in London which will prevent my staying here much longer.'

'You are not looking over robust,' said Jessie, touched with pity by the sad forecast which she saw in his faded eyes, his hollow cheeks, faintly tinged with hectic bloom. 'I'm afraid the Caucasus was rather too severe a training for you.'

'A little harder than the ordeal to which you submitted my locomotive powers some years ago,' answered Angus, smiling; 'but how can a man spend the strength of his manhood better than in beholding the wonders of creation? It is the best preparation for those still grander scenes which one faintly hopes to see by-and-by among the stars. According to the Platonic theory a man must train himself for immortality. He who goes straight from earthly feasts and junkettings will get a bad time in the under world, or may have to work out his purgation in some debased brute form.'

'Poor fellow,' thought Jessie, with a sigh, 'I suppose that kind of feeling is his nearest approach to religion.'

Christabel sat very still, looking steadily towards Lundy, as if the only desire in her mind were to identify yonder vague streak of purplish brown or brownish purple with the level strip of land chiefly given over to rabbits. Yet her heart was aching and throbbing passionately all the while; and the face at which she dared scarce look was vividly before her mental sight—sorely altered from the day she had last seen it smile upon her in love and confidence. But mixed with the heartache there was joy. To see him again, to hear his voice again—what could that be but happiness?

She knew that there was delight in being with him, and she told herself that she had no right to linger. She rose with an automatic air. 'Come, Jessie,' she said: and then she turned with an effort to the man whose love she had renounced, whose heart she had broken.

'Good-bye!' she said, holding out her hand, and looking at him with calm, grave eyes. 'I am very glad to have seen you again. I hope you always think of me as your friend?'

'Yes, Mrs. Tregonell, I can afford now to think of you as a friend,' he answered, gravely, gently, holding her hand with a lingering grasp, and looking solemnly into the sweet pale face.

He shook hands cordially with Jessie Bridgeman, and they left him standing amidst the low grass-hidden graves of the unknown dead—a lonely figure looking seaward.

'Oh! Jessie, do you remember the day we first came here with him?' cried Christabel, as they went slowly down the steep winding path. The exclamation sounded almost like a cry of pain.

'Am I ever likely to forget it—or anything connected with him? You have given me no chance of that,' retorted Miss Bridgeman, sharply.

'How bitterly you say that!'

'Can I help being bitter when I see you nursing morbid feelings? Am I to encourage you to dwell upon dangerous thoughts?'

'They are not dangerous. I have taught myself to think of Angus as a friend—and a friend only. If I could see him now and then—even as briefly as we saw him to-day—I think it would make me quite happy.'

'You don't know what you are talking about!' said Jessie, angrily. 'Certainly, you are not much like other women. You are a piece of icy propriety—your love is a kind of milk-and-watery sentiment, which would never lead you very far astray. I can fancy you behaving somewhat in the style of Werther's Charlotte—who is, to my mind, one of the most detestable women in fiction. Yes! Goethe has created two women who are the opposite poles of feeling—Gretchen and Lottie—and I would stake my faith that Gretchen the fallen has a higher place in heaven than Lottie the impeccable. I hate such dull purity, which is always lined with selfishness. The lover may slay himself in his anguish—but she—yes—Thackeray has said it—she goes on cutting bread and butter!'

Jessie gave a little hysterical laugh, which she accentuated by a leap from the narrow path where she had been walking to a boulder four or five feet below.

'How madly you talk, Jessie. You remind me of Scott's Fenella—and I believe you are almost as wild a creature,' said Christabel.

'Yes! I suspect there is a spice of gipsy blood in my veins. I am subject to these occasional outbreaks—these revolts against Philistinism. Life is so steeped in respectability—the dull level morality which prompts every man to do what his neighbour thinks he ought to do, rather than to be set in motion by the fire that burns within him. This dread of one's neighbour—this slavish respect for public opinion—reduces life to mere mechanism—society to a stage play.'

CHAPTER XIX.

'BUT IT SUFFICETH, THAT THE DAY WILL END.'

CHRISTABEL said no word to her husband about that unexpected meeting with Angus Hamleigh. She knew that the name was obnoxious to Leonard, and she shrank from a statement which might provoke unpleasant speech on his part. Mr. Hamleigh would doubtless have left Trevena in a few days—there was no likelihood of any further meeting.

The next day was a blank day for the Miss Vandeleurs, who found themselves reduced to the joyless society of their own sex.

The harriers met at Trevena at ten o'clock, and thither, after an early breakfast, rode Mr. Tregonell, Captain Vandeleur, and three or four other kindred spirits. The morning was showery and blustery, and it was in vain that Dopsy and Mopsy hinted their desire to be driven to the meet. They were not horsewomen—from no want of pluck or ardour for the chase—but simply from the lack of that material part of the business, horses. Many and many a weary summer day had they paced the path beside Rotten Row, wistfully regarding the riders, and thinking what a seat and what hands they would have had, if Providence had only given them a mount. The people who do not ride are the keenest critics of horsemanship.

Compelled to find their amusements within doors, Dopsy and Mopsy sat in the morning-room for half an hour, as a sacrifice to good manners, paid a duty visit to the nurseries to admire Christabel's baby-boy, and then straggled off to the billiard-room, to play each other, and improve their skill at that delightfully masculine game. Then came luncheon—at which meal, the gentlemen being all away, and the party reduced to four, the baby-boy was allowed to sit on his mother's lap, and make occasional raids upon the table furniture, while the Miss Vandeleurs made believe to worship him. He was a lovely boy, with big blue eyes, wide with wonder at a world which was still full of delight and novelty.

After luncheon, Mopsy and Dopsy retired to their chamber, to concoct, by an ingenious process of re-organization of the same atoms, a new costume for the evening; and as they sat at their work, twisting and undoing bows and lace, and straightening the leaves of artificial flowers, they again discoursed somewhat dejectedly of their return to South Belgravia, which could hardly be staved off much longer.

'We have had a quite too delicious time,' sighed Mopsy, adjusting the stalk of a sunflower; 'but its rather a pity that all the men staying here have been detrimentals—not one worth catching.'

'What does it matter!' ejaculated Dopsy. 'If there had been one worth catching, he wouldn't have consented to be caught. He would have behaved like that big jack Mr. Tregonell was trying for the other morning; eaten up all our bait and gone and sulked among the weeds.'

'Well, I'd have had a try for him, anyhow,' said Mopsy, defiantly, leaning her elbow on the dressing-table, and contemplating herself deliberately in the glass. 'Oh, Dop, how old I'm getting. I almost hate the daylight: it makes one look so hideous.'

Yet neither Dopsy nor Mopsy thought herself hideous at afternoon tea-time, when, with complexions improved by the powder puff, eyebrows piquantly accentuated with Indian ink, and loose flowing tea-gowns of old gold sateen, and older black silk, they descended to the library, eager to do execution even on detrimentals. The men's voices sounded loud in the hall, as the two girls came downstairs.

'Hope you have had a good time?' cried Mopsy, in cheerful soprano tones.

'Splendid. I'm afraid Tregonell has lamed a couple of his horses,' said Captain Vandeleur.

'And I've a shrewd suspicion that you've lamed a third,' interjected Leonard in his strident tones. 'You galloped Betsy Baker at a murderous rate.'

'Nothing like taking them fast down hill,' retorted Jack. 'B. B. is as sound as a roach—and quite as ugly.'

'Never saw such break-neck work in my life,' said Mr. Montagu, a small dandified person who was always called 'little Monty.' 'I'd rather ride a horse with the Quorn for a week than in this country for a day.'

'Our country is as God made it,' answered Leonard.

'I think Satan must have split it about a bit afterwards,' said Mr. Montagu.

'Well, Mop,' asked Leonard, 'how did you and Dop get rid of your day without us?'

'Oh, we were very happy. It was quite a relief to have a nice homey day with dear Mrs. Tregonell,' answered Mopsy, nothing offended by the free and easy curtailment of her pet name. Leonard was her benefactor, and a privileged person.

'I've got some glorious news for you two girls,' said Mr. Tregonell, as they all swarmed into the library, where Christabel was sitting in the widow's old place, while Jessie Bridgeman filled her accustomed position before the tea-table, the red glow of a liberal wood fire contending with the pale light of one low moderator lamp, under a dark velvet shade.

'What is it? Please, please tell.'

'I give it you in ten—a thousand—a million!' cried Leonard, flinging himself into the chair next his wife, and with his eyes upon her face. 'You'll never guess. I have found you an eligible bachelor—a swell of the first water. He's a gentleman whom a good many girls have tried for in their time, I've no doubt. Handsome, accomplished, plenty of coin. He has had what the French call a stormy youth, I believe; but that doesn't matter. He's getting on in years, and no doubt he's ready to sober down, and take to domesticity. I've asked him here for fortnight to shoot woodcock, and to offer his own unconscious breast as a mark for the arrows of Cupid; and I shall have a very poor opinion of you two girls if you can't bring him to your feet in half the time.'

'At any rate I'll try my hand at it,' said Mopsy. 'Not that I care a straw for the gentleman, but just to show you what I can do,' she added, by way of maintaining her maidenly dignity.

'Of course you'll go in for the conquest as high art, without any *arrière pensée*,' said Jack Vandeleur. 'There never were such audacious flirts as my sisters; but there's no malice in them.'

'You haven't told us your friend's name,' said Dopsy.

'Mr. Hamleigh,' answered Leonard, with his eyes still on his wife's face.

Christabel gave a little start, and looked at him in undisguised astonishment.

'Surely you have not asked him—here?' she exclaimed.

'Why not? He was out with us to-day. He is a jolly fellow; rides uncommonly straight, though he dosen't look as if there were much life in him. He tailed off early in the afternoon; but while he did go, he went dooced well. He rode a dooced fine horse, too.'

'I thought you were prejudiced against him,' said Christabel, very slowly.

'Why, so I was, till I saw him,' answered Leonard, with the friendliest air. 'I fancied he was one of your sickly, sentimental twaddlers, with long hair, and a taste for poetry; but I find he is a fine, manly fellow, with no nonsense about him. So I asked him here, and insisted upon his saying yes. He didn't seem to want to come, which is odd, for he made himself very much at home here in my mother's time, I've heard. However, he gave in when I pressed him; and he'll be here by dinner-time to-morrow.'

'By dinner-time,' thought Mopsy, delighted. 'Then he'll see us first by candlelight, and first impressions may do so much.'

'Isn't it almost like a fairy tale?' said Dopsy, as they were dressing for dinner, with a vague recollection of having cultivated her imagination in childhood. She had never done so since that juvenile age. 'Just as we were sighing for the prince he comes.' 'True,' said Mopsy; 'and he will go, just as all the other fairy princes have gone, leaving us alone upon the dreary high road, and riding off to the fairy princesses who have good homes, and good clothes, and plenty of money.'

The high-art toilets were postponed for the following evening, so that the panoply of woman's war might be fresh; and on that evening Mopsy and Dopsy, their long limbs sheathed in sea-green velveteen, Toby-frills round their necks, and sunflowers on their shoulders, were gracefully grouped near the fireplace in the pink and white panelled drawing-room, waiting for Mr. Hamleigh's arrival.

'I wonder why all the girls make themselves walking advertisements of the Sun Fire Office,' speculated Mr. Montagu, taking a prosaic view of the Vandeleur sunflowers, as he sat by Miss Bridgeman's work-basket.

'Don't you know that sunflowers are so beautifully Greek?' asked Jessie. 'They have been the only flower in fashion since Alma Tadema took to painting them—fountains, and marble balustrades, and Italian skies, and beautiful women, and sunflowers.'

'Yes; but we get only the sunflowers.'

'Mr. Hamleigh!' said the butler at the open door, and Angus came in, and went straight to Christabel, who was sitting opposite the group of sea-green Vandeleurs, slowly fanning herself with a big black fan.

Nothing could be calmer than their meeting. This time there was no surprise, no sudden shock, no dear familiar scene, no solemn grandeur of Nature to make all effort at simulation unnatural. The atmosphere to-night was as conventional as the men's swallowed-tailed coats and white ties. Yet in Angus Hamleigh's mind there was the picture of his first arrival at Mount Royal—the firelit room, Christabel's girlish figure kneeling on the hearth. The figure was a shade more matronly now, the carriage and manner were more dignified; but the face had lost none of its beauty, or of its divine candour.

'I am very glad my husband persuaded you to alter your plans, and to stay a little longer in the West,' she said, with an unfaltering voice; and then, seeing Mopsy and Dopsy looking at Mr. Hamleigh with admiring expectant eyes, she added, 'Let me introduce you to these young ladies who are staying with us—Mr. Hamleigh, Miss Vandeleur, Miss Margaret Vandeleur.'

Dopsy and Mopsy smiled their sweetest smiles, and gave just the most æsthetic inclination of each towzled head.

'I suppose you have not long come from London?' murmured Dopsy, determined not to lose a moment. 'Have you seen all the new things at the theatres? I hope you are an Irvingite?'

'I regret to say that my religious opinions have not yet taken that bent. It is a spiritual height which I feel myself too weak to climb. I have never been able to believe in the unknown tongues.'

'Ah, now you are going to criticize his pronunciation, instead of admiring his genius,' said Dopsy, who had never heard of Edward Irving and the Latter Day Saints.

'If you mean Henry Irving the tragedian, I admire him immensely,' said Mr. Hamleigh.

'Then we are sure to get on. I felt that you must be *simpatica*,' replied Dopsy, not particular as to a gender in a language which she only knew by sight, as Bannister knew Greek.

Dinner was announced at this moment, and Mrs. Tregonell won Dopsy's gratitude by asking Mr. Hamleigh to take her into dinner. Mr. Montague gave his arm to Miss Bridgeman, Leonard took Mopsy, and Christabel followed with Major Bree, who felt for her keenly, wondering how she managed to bear herself so bravely, reproaching the dead woman in his mind for having parted two faithful hearts.

He was shocked by the change in Angus, obvious even to-night, albeit the soft lamplight and evening dress wereflattering to his appearance; but he said no word of that change to Christabel.

'I have been having a romp with my godson,' he said when they were seated, knowing that this was the one topic likely to cheer and interest his hostess.

'I am so glad,' she answered, lighting up at once, and unconscious that Angus was trying to see her face under the low lamplight, which made it necessary to bend one's head a little to see one's opposite neighbour. 'And do you think he is grown? It is nearly ten days since you saw him, and he grows so fast.'

'He is a young Hercules. If there were any snakes in Cornwall he would be capable of strangling a brace of them. I suppose Leonard is tremendously proud of him.'

'Yes,' she answered with a faint sigh. 'I think Leonard is *proud* of him.'

'But not quite so fond of him as you are,' replied Major Bree, interpreting her emphasis. 'That is only natural. Infantolatry is a feminine attribute. Wait till the boy is old enough to go out fishin' and shootin'—' the Major was too much a gentleman to pronounce a final g—'and then see if his father don't dote upon him.'

'I dare say he will be very fond of him then. But I shall be miserable every hour he is out.'

'Of course. Women ought to have only girls for children. There should be a race of man-mothers to rear the boys. I wonder Plato didn't suggest that in his Republic.'

Mr. Hamleigh, with his head gently bent over his soup-plate, had contrived to watch Christabel's face while politely replying to a good deal of gush on the part of the fair Dopsy. He saw that expressive face light up with smiles, and then grow earnest. She was full of interest and animation, and her candid look showed that the conversation was one which all the world might have heard.

'She has forgotten me. She is happy in her married life,' he said to himself, and then he looked to the other end of the table where Leonard sat, burly, florid, black-haired, mutton-chop whiskered, the very essence of Philistinism—'happy—with him.'

'And I am sure you must adore Ellen Terry,' said Dopsy, whose society-conversation was not a many-stringed instrument.

'Who could live and not worship her?' ejaculated Mr Hamleigh.

'Irving as Shylock!' sighed Dopsy.

'Miss Terry as Portia,' retorted Angus.

'Unutterably sweet, was she not?'

'Her movements were like a sonata by Beethoven—her gowns were the essence of all that Rubens and Vandyck ever painted.'

'I knew you would agree with me,' exclaimed Dopsy. 'And do you think her pretty?'

'Pretty is not the word. She is simply divine. Greuze might have painted her—there is no living painter whose palette holds the tint of those blue eyes.'

Dopsy began to giggle softly to herself, and to flutter her fan with maiden modesty.

'I hardly like to mention it after what you have said,' she murmured, 'but——'

'Pray be explicit.'

'I have been told that I am rather'—another faint giggle and another flutter—'like Miss Terry.'

'I never met a fair-haired girl yet who had not been told as much,' answered Mr. Hamleigh, coolly.

Dopsy turned crimson, and felt that this particular arrow had missed the gold. Mr. Hamleigh was not quite so easy to get on with as her hopeful fancy had painted him.

After dinner there was some music, in which art neither of the Miss Vandeleurs excelled. Indeed, their time had been too closely absorbed by the ever pressing necessity for cutting and contriving to allow of the study of art and literature. They knew the names of writers, and the outsides of books, and they adored the opera, and enjoyed a ballad concert, if the singers were popular, and the audience well dressed; and this was the limit of their artistic proclivities. They sat stifling their yawns, and longing for an adjournment to the billiard-room—whither

Jack Vandeleur and Mr. Montagu had departed—while Christabel played a capriccio by Mendelssohn. Mr. Hamleigh sat by the piano listening to every note. Leonard and Major Bree lounged by the fireplace, Jessie Bridgeman sitting near them, absorbed in her crewel work.

It was what Mopsy and Dopsy called a very 'slow evening, despite the new interest afforded by Mr. Hamleigh's presence. He was very handsome, very elegant, with an inexpressible something in his style and air which Mopsy thought poetical. But it was weary work to sit and gaze at him as if he were a statue, and that long capriccio, with a little Beethoven to follow, and a good deal of Mozart after that, occupied the best part of the evening. To the ears of Mop and Dop it was all tweeledum and tweedledee. They would have been refreshed by one of those lively melodies in which Miss Farren so excels; they would have welcomed a familiar strain from Chilperic or Madame Angot. Yet they gushed and said, 'too delicious—quite too utterly lovely,' when Mrs. Tregonell rose from the piano.

'I only hope I have not wearied everybody,' she said.

Leonard and Major Bree had been talking local politics all the time, and both expressed themselves much gratified by the music. Mr. Hamleigh murmured his thanks.

Christabel went to her room wondering that the evening had passed so calmly—that her heart—though it had ached at the change in Angus Hamleigh's looks, had been in no wise tumultuously stirred by his presence. There had been a peaceful feeling in her mind rather than agitation. She had been soothed and made happy by his society. If love still lingered in her breast it was love purified of every earthly thought and hope. She told herself sorrowfully that for him the sand ran low in the glass of earthly time, and it was sweet to have him near her for a little while towards the end; to be able to talk to him of serious things—to inspire hope in a soul whose natural bent was despondency. It would be sadly, unutterably sweet to talk to him of that spiritual world whose unearthly light already shone in the too brilliant eye, and coloured the hollow cheek. She had found Mr. Hamleigh despondent and sceptical, but never indifferent to religion. He was not one of that eminently practical school which, in the words of Matthew Arnold, thinks it more important to learn how buttons and *papier-mâche* are made than to search the depths of conscience, or fathom the mysteries of a Divine Providence.

Christabel's first sentiment when Leonard announced Mr. Hamleigh's intended visit had been horror. How could they two who had loved so deeply, parted so sadly, live together under the same roof as if they were every-day friends? The thing seemed fraught with danger, impossible for peace. But when s' remembered that calm, almost solemn look with which he had shaken hands with her among the graves at Tintagel, it seemed to her that friendship—calmest, purest, most unselfish attachment—was still possible between them. She thought so even more hopefully on the morning after Mr. Hamleigh's arrival, when he took her boy in his arms, and pressed his lips lovingly upon the bright baby brow.

'You are fond of children,' exclaimed Mopsy, prepared to gush.

'Very fond of some children,' he answered gravely. 'I shall be very fond of this boy, if he will let me.'

'Leo is such a darling—and he takes to you already,' said Mopsy, seeing that the child graciously accepted Mr. Hamleigh's attentions, and even murmured an approving 'gur'—followed by a simple one-part melody of gurgling noises—but whether in approval of the gentleman himself or of his watch-chain, about which the pink flexible fingers had wound themselves, was an open question.

This was in the hall after breakfast, on a bright sunshiny morning—doors and windows open, and the gardens outside all abloom with chrysanthemums and scarlet geraniums; the gentlemen of the party standing about with their guns ready to start. Mopsy and Dopsy were dressed in home-made gowns of dark brown serge which simulated the masculine simplicity of tailor-made garments. They wore coquettish little toques of the same dark brown stuff, also home-made—and surely, if a virtuous man contending with calamity is a spectacle meet for the gods to admire a needy young woman making her own raiment is at least worthy of human approval.

'You are coming with us, aren't you, Hamleigh?' asked Leonard, seeing Angus still occupied with the child.

'No, thanks; I don't feel in good form for woodcock shooting. My cough was rather troublesome last night.'

Mopsy and Dopsy looked at each other despairingly. Here was a golden opportunity lost. If it were only possible to sprain an ankle on the instant.

Jack Vandeleur was a good brother—so long as fraternal kindness did not cost money—and he saw that look of blank despair in poor Dopsy's eyes and lips.

'I think Mr. Hamleigh is wise,' he said. 'This bright morning will end in broken weather. Hadn't you two girls better stay at home? The rain will spoil your gowns.'

'Our gowns won't hurt,' said Mopsy brightening. 'But do you really think there will be rain? We had so set our hearts on going with you; but it is rather miserable to be out on those hills in a blinding rain. One might walk over the edge of a cliff.'

'Keep on the safe side and stay at home,' said Leonard, with that air of rough good nature which is such an excellent excuse for bad manners. 'Come Ponto, come Juno, hi Delia,' this to the lovely lemon and white spaniels, fawning upon him with mute affection.

'I think we may as well give it up,' said Dopsy, 'we shall be a nuisance to the shooters if it rains.'

So they stayed, and beguiled Mr. Hamleigh to the billiard-room, where they both played against him, and were beaten—after which Mopsy entreated him to give her a lesson in the art, declaring that he played divinely—in such a quiet style—so very superior to Jack's or Mr. Tregonell's, though both those gentlemen were good players. Angus consented, kindly enough, and gave both ladies the most careful instruction in the art of making pockets and cannons; but he was wondering all the while how Christabel was spending her morning, and thinking how sweet it would have been to have strolled with her across the hills to the quiet little church in the dingle where he had once dreamed they two might be married.

'I was a fool to submit to delay,' he thought, remembering all the pain and madness of the past. 'If I had insisted on being married here—and at once—how happy—oh God!—how happy we might have been. Well, it matters little, now that the road is so near the end. I suppose the dismal close would have come just as soon if my way of life had been strewed with flowers.'

It was luncheon-time before the Miss Vandeleurs consented to release him. Once having got him in their clutch he was as firmly held as if he had been caught by an octopus. Christabel wondered a little that Angus Hamleigh should find amusement for his morning in the billiard-room, and in such society.

'Perhaps, after all, the Miss Vandeleurs are the kind of girls whom all gentlemen admire,' she said to Jessie. 'I know I thought it odd that Leonard should admire them; but you see Mr. Hamleigh is equally pleased with them.'

'Mr. Hamleigh is nothing of the kind,' answered Jessie, in her usual decided way. 'But Dop is setting her cap at him in a positively disgraceful manner—even for Dop.'

'Pray don't call her by that horrid name.'

'Why not; it is what her brother and sister call her, and it expresses her so exactly.'

Mr. Hamleigh and the two damsels now appeared, summoned by the gong, and they all went into the dining-room. It was quite a merry luncheon party. Care seemed to have no part in that cheery circle. Angus had made up his mind to be happy, and Christabel was as much at ease with him as she had been in those innocent unconscious days when he first came to Mount Royal. Dopsy was in high spirits, thinking that she was fast advancing towards victory. Mr. Hamleigh had been so kind, so attentive, had done exactly what she had asked him to do, and how could she doubt that he had consulted his own pleasure in so doing. Poor Dopsy was accustomed to be treated with scant ceremony by her brother's acquaintance, and it did not enter into her mind that a man might be bored by her society, and not betray his weariness.

After luncheon Jessie, who was always energetic, suggested a walk.

The threatened bad weather had not come: it was a greyish afternoon, sunless but mild.

'If we walk towards St. Nectan's Kieve, we may meet the shooters,' said Christabel. 'That is a great place for woodcock.'

'That will be delicious!' exclaimed Dopsy. 'I worship St. Nectan's Kieve. Such a lovely ferny, rocky, wild, watery spot.' And away she and her sister skipped, to put on the brown toques, and to refresh themselves with a powder puff.

They started for their ramble with Randie, and a favourite Clumber spaniel, degraded from his proud position as a sporting dog, to the ignoble luxury of a house pet, on account of an incorrigible desultoriness in his conduct with birds.

These affectionate creatures frisked round Christabel, while Miss Vandeleur and her sister seemed almost as friskily to surround Mr. Hamleigh with their South Belgravian blandishments.

'You look as if you were not very strong,' hazarded Dopsy, sympathetically. 'Are you not afraid of a long walk?'

'Not at all; I never feel better than when walking on these hills,' answered Angus. 'It is almost my native air, you see. I came here to get a stock of rude health before I go to winter in the South.'

'And you are really going to be abroad all the winter?' sighed Dopsy, as if she would have said, 'How shall I bear my life in your absence.'

'Yes, it is five years since I spent a winter in England. I hold my life on that condition. I am never to know the luxury of a London fog, or see a Drury Lane Pantomime, or skate upon the Serpentine. A case of real distress, is it not?'

'Very sad—for your friends,' said Dopsy; 'but I can quite imagine that you love the sunny south. How I long to see the Mediterranean—the mountains—the pine-trees—the borderland of Italy.'

'No doubt you will go there some day—and be disappointed. People generally are when they indulge in day-dreams about a place.'

'My dreams will always be dreams,' answered Dopsy, with a profound sigh: 'we are not rich enough to travel.'

Christabel walked on in front with Jessie and the dogs. Mr. Hamleigh was longing to be by her side—to talk as they had talked of old—of a thousand things which could be safely discussed without any personal feeling. They had so many sympathies, so many ideas in common. All the world of sense and sentiment was theirs wherein to range at will. But Dopsy and Mopsy stuck to him like burs; plying him with idle questions, and stereotyped remarks, looking at him with languishing eyes.

He was too much a gentleman, had too much good feeling to be rude to them—but he was bored excessively.

They went by the cliffs—a wild grand walk. The wide Atlantic spread its dull leaden-coloured waves before them under the grey sky—touched with none of those translucent azures and carmines which so often beautify that western sea. They crossed a bit of hillocky common, and then went down to look at a slate quarry under the cliff—a scene of uncanny grandeur—grey and wild and desolate.

Dopsy and Mopsy gushed and laughed, and declared that it was just the scene for a murder, or a duel, or something dreadful and dramatic. The dogs ran into all manner of perilous places, and had to be called away from the verge of instant death.

'Are you fond of aristocratic society, Miss Vandeleur?' asked Angus.

Mopsy pleaded guilty to a prejudice in favour of the Upper Ten.

'Then allow me to tell you that you were never in the company of so many duchesses and countesses in your life as you are at this moment.'

Mopsy looked mystified, until Miss Bridgeman explained that these were the names given to slates of particular sizes, great stacks of which stood on either side of them ready for shipment.

'How absurd!' exclaimed Mopsy.

'Everything must have a name, even the slate that roofs your scullery.'

From the quarry they strolled across the fields to the high road, and the gate of the farm which contains within its boundary the wonderful waterfall called St. Nectan's Kieve.

They met the sportsmen coming out of the hollow with well-filled game-bags.

Leonard was in high spirits.

'So you've all come to meet us,' he said, looking at his wife, and from his wife to Angus Hamleigh, with a keen, quick glance, too swift to be remarkable. 'Uncommonly good of you. We are going to have a grand year for woodcock, I believe—like the season of 1855, when a farmer of St. Buryan shot fifty-four in one week.'

'Poor dear little birds!' sighed Mopsy; 'I feel so sorry for them.'

'But that doesn't prevent your eating them, with breadcrumbs and gravy,' said Leonard, laughing.

'When they are once roasted, it can make no difference who eats them,' replied Mopsy; 'but I am intensely sorry for them all the same.'

They all went home together, a cheery procession, with the dogs at their heels. Mr. Hamleigh's efforts to escape from the two damsels who had marked him for their own, were futile: nothing less than sheer brutality would have set him free. They trudged along gaily, one on each side of him! they flattered him, they made much of him—a man must have been stony-hearted to remain untouched by such attentions. Angus was marble, but he could not be uncivil. It was his nature to be gentle to women. Mop and Dop were the kind of girls he most detested—indeed, it seemed to him that no other form of girlhood could be so detestable. They had all the pertness of Bohemia without any of its wit—they had all the audacity of the *demi-monde*, with far inferior attractions. Everything about them was spurious and second-hand—every air and look and tone was put on, like a ribbon or a flower, to attract attention. And could it be that one of these meretricious creatures was angling for him—for him, the Lauzun, the d'Eckmühl, the Prince de Belgioso, of his day—the born dandy, with whom fastidiousness was a sixth sense? Intolerable as the idea of being so pursued was to him, Angus Hamleigh could not bring himself to be rude to a woman

It happened, therefore, that from the beginning to the end of that long ramble, he was never in Mrs. Tregonell's society. She and Jessie walked steadily ahead with their dogs, while the sportsmen tramped slowly behind Mr. Hamleigh and the two girls

'Our friend seems to be very much taken by your sisters,' said Leonard to Captain Vandeleur.

'My sisters are deuced taking girls,' answered Jack, puffing at his seventeenth cigarette; 'though I suppose it isn't my business to say so. There's nothing of the professional beauty about either of 'em.'

'Distinctly not!' said Leonard.

'But they've plenty of *chic*—plenty of go—*savoir faire*—and all that kind of thing, don't you know. They're the most companionable girls I ever met with!'

'They're uncommonly jolly little buffers!' said Leonard, kindly meaning it for the highest praise.

'They've no fool's flesh about them,' said Jack; 'and they can make a fiver go further than any one I know. A man might do worse than marry one of them.'

'Hardly!' thought Leonard, 'unless he married both.'

'It would be a fine thing for Dop if Mr. Hamleigh were to come to the scratch,' mused Jack.

'I wonder what was Leonard's motive in asking Mr. Hamleigh to stay at Mount Royal?' said Christabel, suddenly, after she and Jessie had been talking of different subjects.

'I hope he had not any motive, but that the invitation was the impulse of the moment, without rhyme or reason,' answered Miss Bridgeman.

'Why?'

'Because if he had a motive, I don't think it could be a good one.'

'Might he not think it just possible that he was finding a husband for one of his friend's sisters?' speculated Christabel.

'Nonsense, my dear! Leonard is not quite a fool. If he had a motive, it was something very different from any concern for the interests of Dop or Mop—I will call them Dop and Mop: they are so like it.'

In spite of Mopsy and Dopsy, there were hours in which Angus Hamleigh was able to enjoy the society which had once been so sweet to him, almost as freely as in the happy days that were gone. Brazen as the two damsels were the feeling of self-respect was not altogether extinct in their natures. Their minds were like grass-plots which had been trodden into mere clay, but where a lingering green blade here and there shows that the soil had once been verdant. Before Mr. Hamleigh came to Mount Royal, it had been their habit to spend their evenings in the billiard-room with the gentlemen, albeit Mrs. Tregonell very rarely left the drawing-room after dinner, preferring the perfect tranquillity of that almost deserted apartment, the inexhaustible delight of her piano or her books, with Jessie for her sole companion—nay, sometimes, quite alone, while Jessie joined the revellers at pool or shell-out. Dopsy and Mopsy could not altogether alter their habits because Mr. Hamleigh spent his evenings in the drawing-room: the motive for such a change would have been too obvious. The boldest huntress would scarce thus openly pursue her prey. So the Miss Vandeleurs went regretfully with their brother and his host, and marked, or played an occasional four-game, and made themselves conversationally agreeable all the evening; while Angus Hamleigh sat by the piano, and gave himself up to dreamy thought, soothed by the music of the great composers, played with a level perfection which only years of careful study can achieve. Jessie Bridgeman never left the drawing-room now of an evening. Faithful and devoted to her duty of companion and friend, she seemed almost Christabel's second self. There was no restraint, no embarrassment, caused by her presence. What she had been to these two in their day of joy, she was to them in their day of sorrow, wholly and completely one of themselves. She was no stony guardian of the proprieties; no bar between their souls and dangerous memories or allusions. She was their friend, reading and understanding the minds of both.

It has been finely said by Matthew Arnold that there are times when a man feels, in this life, the sense of immortality; and that feeling must surely be strongest with him who knows that his race is nearly run—who feels the rosy light of life's sunset warm upon his face—who knows himself near the lifting of the veil—the awful, fateful experiment called death. Angus Hamleigh knew that for him the end was not far off—it might be less than a year—more than a year—but he felt very sure that this time there would be no reprieve. Not again would the physician's sentence be reversed—the physician's theories gainsayed by facts. For the last four years he had lived as a man lives who has ceased to value his life. He has exposed himself to the hardships of mountain climbing—he had sat late in gaming saloons—not gambling himself, but interested in a cynical way, as Balzac might have been, in the hopes and fears of others—seeking amusement wherever and however it was to be found. At his worst he had never been a man utterly without religion; not a man who could willingly forego the hope in a future life—but that hope, until of late, had been clouded and dim, Rabelais' great perhaps, rather than the Christian's assured belief. As the cold shade of death drew nearer, the horizon cleared, and he was able to rest his hopes in a fair future beyond the grave—an existence in which a man's happiness should not be dependent on the condition of his lungs, nor his career marred by an hereditary taint in the blood—an existence in which spirit should be divorced from clay, yet not become so entirely abstract as to be incapable of such pleasures as are sweetest and purest among the joys of humanity—a life in which friendship and love might still be known in fullest measure. And now, with the knowledge that for him there remained but a brief remnant of this earthly existence, that were the circumstances of his life ever so full of joy, that life itself could not be lengthened, it was very sweet to him to spend a few quiet hours with her who, for the last five years, had been the pole-star of his thoughts. For him there could be no *arrière pensée*—no tending towards forbidden hopes, forbidden dreams. Death had purified life. It was almost as if he were an immortal spirit, already belonging to another world, yet permitted to revisit the old dead-and-gone love below. For such a man, and perhaps for such a man only, was such a super-mundane love as poets and idealists have imagined, all satisfying and all sweet. He was not even jealous of his happier rival; his only regret was the too evident unworthiness of that rival.

'If I had seen her married to a man I could respect; if I could know that she was completely happy; that the life before her were secure from all pain and evil, I should have nothing to regret,' he told himself; but the thought of Leonard's coarse nature was a perpetual grief. 'When I am lying in the long peaceful sleep, she will be miserable with that man,' he thought.

One day when Jessie and he were alone together, he spoke freely of Leonard.

'I don't want to malign a man who has treated me with exceptional kindness and cordiality,' he said, 'above all a man whose mother I once loved, and always respected—yes, although she was hard and cruel to me—but I cannot help wishing that Christabel's husband had a more sympathetic nature. Now that my own future is reduced to a very short span I find myself given to forecasting the future of those I——love—and it grieves me to think of Christabel in the years to come—linked with a man who has no power to appreciate or understand her—tied to the mill-wheel of domestic duty.'

'Yes, it is a hard case,' answered Jessie, bitterly, 'one of those hard cases that so often come out of people acting for the best, as they call it. No doubt Mrs. Tregonell thought she acted for the best with regard to you and Christabel. She did not know how much selfishness—a selfish idolatry of her own cub—was at the bottom of her over-righteousness. She was a good woman—generous, benevolent—a true friend to me—yet there are times when I feel angry with her—even in her grave—for her treatment of you and Christabel. Yet she died happy in the belief in her own wisdom. She thought Christabel's marriage with Leonard ought to mean bliss for both. Because she adored her Cornish gladiator, forsooth, she must needs think everybody else ought to dote upon him.'

'You don't seem warmly attached to Mr. Tregonell,' said Angus.

'I am not—and he knows that I am not. I never liked him, and he never liked me, and neither of us have ever pretended to like each other. We are quits, I assure you. Perhaps you think it rather horrid of me to live in a man's house—eat his bread and drink his wine—one glass of claret every day at dinner—and dislike him openly all the time. But I am here because Christabel is here—just as I would be with her in the dominions of Orcus. She is—well—almost the only creature I love in this world, and it would take a good deal more than my dislike of her husband to part us. If she had married a galley-slave I would have taken my turn at the oar.'

'You are as true as steel,' said Angus: 'and I am glad to think Christabel has such a friend.'

To all the rest of the world he spoke of her as Mrs. Tregonell, nor did he ever address her by any other name. But to Jessie Bridgeman who had been with them in the halcyon days of their lovemaking, she was still Christabel. To Jessie, and to none other, could he speak of her with perfect freedom.

CHAPTER XX.

'WHO KNOWS NOT CIRCE?'

THE autumn days crept by, sometimes grey and sad of aspect, sometimes radiant and sunny, as if summer had risen from her grave amidst fallen leaves and faded heather. It was altogether a lovely autumn, like that beauteous season of five years ago, and Christabel and Angus wandered about the hills, and lingered by the trout stream in the warm green valley, almost as freely as they had done in the past. They were never alone—Jessie Bridgeman was always with them—very often Dopsy and Mopsy—and sometimes Mr. Tregonell with Captain Vandeleur and half a dozen dogs. One day they all went up the hill, and crossed the ploughed field to the path among the gorse and heather above Pentargon Bay—and Dopsy and Mopsy climbed crags and knolls, and screamed affrightedly, and made a large display of boots, and were generally fascinating after their manner.

'If any place could tempt me to smoke it would be this,' said Dopsy, gazing seaward. All the men except Angus were smoking. 'I think it must be utterly lovely to sit dreaming over a cigarette in such a place as this.'

'What would you dream about,' asked Angus. 'A new bonnet?'

'Don't be cynical. You think I am awfully shallow, because I am not a perambulating book-shelf like Mrs. Tregonell, who seems to have read all the books that ever were printed.'

'There you are wrong. She has read a few—*non multa sed multum*—but they are the very best, and she has read them well enough to remember them,' answered Angus, quietly.

'And Mop and I often read three volumes in a day, and seldom remember a line of what we read,' sighed Dopsy. 'Indeed, we are awfully ignorant. Of course we learnt things at school—French and German—Italian—natural history—physical geography—geology—and all the onomies. Indeed, I shudder when I remember what a lot of learning was poured into our poor little heads, and how soon it all ran out again.'

Dopsy gave her most fascinating giggle, and sat in an æsthetic attitude idly plucking up faded heather blossoms with a tightly gloved hand, and wondering whether Mr. Hamleigh noticed how small the hand was. She thought she was going straight to his heart with these naïve confessions; she had always heard that men hated learned women, and no doubt Mr. Hamleigh's habit of prosing about books with Mrs. Tregonell was merely the homage he payed to his hostess.

'You and Mrs. Tregonell are so dreadfully grave when you get together,' pursued Dopsy, seeing that her companion held his peace. She had contrived to be by Mr. Hamleigh's side when he crossed the field, and had in a manner got possessed of him for the rest of the afternoon, barring some violent struggle for emancipation on his part. 'I always wonder what you can find to say to each other.'

'I don't think there is much cause for wonder. We have many tastes in common. We are both fond of music—of Nature—and of books. There is a wide field for conversation.'

'Why won't you talk with me of books. There are some books I adore. Let us talk about Dickens.'

'With all my heart. I admire every line he wrote—I think him the greatest genius of this age. We have had great writers—great thinkers—great masters of style—but Scott and Dickens were the Creators—they made new worlds and peopled them. I am quite ready to talk about Dickens.'

'I don't think I could say a single word after that outburst of yours,' said Dopsy; 'you go too fast for me.'

He had talked eagerly, willing to talk just now even to Miss Vandeleur, trying not too vividly to remember that other day—that unforgotten hour—in which, on this spot, face to face with that ever changing, ever changeless sea, he had submitted his fate to Christabel, not daring to ask for her love, warning her rather against the misery that might come to her from loving him. And misery had come, but not as he presaged. It had come from his youthful sin, that one fatal turn upon the road of life which he had taken so lightly, tripping with joyous companions along a path strewn with roses. He, like so many, had gathered his roses while he might, and had found that he had to bear the sting of their thorns when he must.

Leonard came up behind them as they talked, Mr. Hamleigh standing by Miss Vandeleur's side, digging his stick into the heather and staring idly at the sea.

'What are you two talking about so earnestly?' he asked; 'you are always together. I begin to understand why Hamleigh is so indifferent to sport.'

The remark struck Angus as strange, as well as underbred. Dopsy had contrived to inflict a good deal of her society upon him at odd times; but he had taken particular care that nothing in his bearing or discourse should compromise either himself or the young lady.

Dopsy giggled faintly, and looked modestly at the heather.

It was still early in the afternoon, and the western light shone full upon a face which might have been pretty if Nature's bloom had not long given place to the poetic pallor of the powder-puff.

'We were talking about Dickens,' said Dopsy, with an elaborate air of struggling with the tumult of her feelings. 'Don't you adore him?'

'If you mean the man who wrote books, I never read 'em,' answered Leonard; 'life isn't long enough for books that don't teach you anything. I've read pretty nearly every book that was ever written upon horses and dogs and guns, and a good many on mechanics; that's enough for me. I don't care for books that only titillate one's imagination. Why should one read books to make oneself cry and to make oneself laugh. It's as idiotic a habit as taking snuff to make oneself sneeze.'

'That's rather a severe way of looking at the subject,' said Angus.

'It's a practical way, that's all. My wife surfeits herself with poetry. She is stuffed with Tennyson and Browning, loaded to the very muzzle with Byron and Shelley. She reads Shakespeare as devoutly as she reads her Bible. But I don't see that it helps to make her pleasant company for her husband or her friends. She is never so happy as when she has her nose in a book; give her a bundle of books and a candle and she would be happy in the little house on the top of Willapark.'

'Not without you and her boy,' said Dopsy, gushingly. 'She could never exist without you two.'

Mr. Tregonell lit himself another cigar, and strolled off without a word.

'He has not lovable manners has he?' inquired Dopsy, with her childish air; 'but he is so good-hearted.'

'No doubt. You have known him some time, haven't you?' inquired Angus, who had been struggling with an uncomfortable yearning to kick the Squire into the Bay.

The scene offered such temptations. They were standing on the edge of the amphitheatre, the ground shelving steeply downward in front of them, rocks and water below. And to think that she—his dearest, she, all gentleness and refinement, was mated to this coarse clay! Was King Marc such an one as this he wondered, and if he were, who could be angry with Tristan—Tristan who died longing to see his lost love—struck to death by his wife's cruel lie—Tristan whose passionate soul passed by metempsychosis into briar and leaf, and crept across the arid rock to meet and mingle with the beloved dead. Oh, how sweet and sad the old legend seemed to Angus to-day, standing above the melancholy sea, where he and she had stood folded in each other's arms in the sweet triumphant moment of love's first avowal.

Dopsy did not allow him much leisure for mournful meditation. She prattled on in that sweetly girlish manner which was meant to be all spirit and sparkle—glancing from theme to theme, like the butterfly among the flowers, and showing a level ignorance on all. Mr. Hamleigh listened with Christian resignation, and even allowed himself to be her escort home—and to seem especially attentive to her at afternoon tea: for although it may take two to make a quarrel, assuredly one, if she be but brazen enough, may make a flirtation. Dopsy felt that time was short, and that strong measures were necessary. Mr. Hamleigh had been very polite—attentive even. Dopsy, accustomed to the free and easy manners of her brother's friends, mistook Mr. Hamleigh's natural courtsey to the sex for particular homage to the individual. But he had 'said nothing,' and she was no nearer the assurance of becoming Mrs. Hamleigh than she had been on the evening of his arrival. Dopsy had been fain to confess this to Mopsy in the confidence of sisterly discourse.

'It seems as if I might just as well have had a try for him myself, instead of standing out to give you a better chance,' retorted Mopsy, somewhat scornfully.

'Go in and win, if you can,' said Dopsy. 'It won't be the first time you've tried to cut me out.'

Dopsy, embittered by the sense of failure, determined on new tactics. Hitherto she had been all sparkle—now she melted into a touching sadness.

'What a delicious old room this is,' she murmured, glancing round at the bookshelves and dark panelling, the high wide chimney-piece with its coat-of-arms, in heraldic colours, flashing and gleaming against a background of brown oak. 'I cannot help feeling wretched at the idea that next week I shall be far away from this dear place—in dingy dreary London. Oh, Mr. Hamleigh,'—detaining him while she selected one particular piece of sugar from the basin he was handing her—'don't you detest London?'

'Not absolutely. I have sometimes found it endurable.'

'Ah, you have your clubs—just the one pleasant street in all the great overgrown city—and that street lined with palaces, whose doors are always standing open for you. Libraries, smoking rooms, billiard-tables, perfect dinners, and all that is freshest and brightest in the way of society. I don't wonder men like London. But for women it has only two attractions—Mudie, and the shop-windows!'

'And the park—the theatres—the churches—the delight of looking at other women's gowns and bonnets. I thought that could never pall?'

'It does though. There comes a time when one feels weary of everything,' said Dopsy, pensively stirring her tea, and so fixing Mr. Hamleigh with her conversation that he was obliged to linger—yea, even to set down his own tea-cup on an adjacent table, and to seat himself by the charmer's side.

'I thought you so delighted in the theatres,' he said. 'You were full of enthusiasm about the drama the night I first dined here.'

'Was I?' demanded Dopsy, naïvely. 'And now I feel as if I did not care a straw about all the plays that were ever acted—all the actors who ever lived. Strange, is it not, that one can change so, in one little fortnight?'

'The change is an hallucination. You are fascinated by the charms of a rural life, which you have not known long enough for satiety. You will be just as fond of plays and players when you get back to London.'

'Never,' exclaimed Dopsy. 'It is not only my taste that is changed. It is myself. I feel as if I were a new creature.'

'What a blessing for yourself and society if the change were radical,' said Mr. Hamleigh, within himself; and then he answered, lightly,

'Perhaps you have been attending the little chapel at Boscastle, secretly imbibing the doctrines of advanced Methodism, and this is a spiritual awakening.'

'No,' sighed Dopsy, shaking her head, pensively, as she gazed at her teacup. 'It is an utter change. I cannot make it out. I don't think I shall ever care for gaiety—parties—theatres—dress—again.'

'Oh, this must be the influence of the Methodists.'

'I hate Methodists! I never spoke to one in my life. I should like to go into a convent. I should like to belong to a Protestant sisterhood, and to nurse the poor in their own houses. It would be nasty; I should catch some dreadful complaint, and die, I daresay; but it would be better than what I feel now.'

And Dopsy, taking advantage of the twilight, and the fact that she and Angus were at some distance from the rest of the party, burst into tears. They were very real tears—tears of vexation, disappointment, despair; and they made Angus very uncomfortable.

'My dear Miss Vandeleur, I am so sorry to see you distressed. Is there anything on your mind? Is there anything that I can do? Shall I fetch your sister?'

'No, no,' gasped Dopsy, in a choked voice. 'Please don't go away. I like you to be near me.'

She put out her hand—a chilly, tremulous hand, with no passion in it save the passionate pain of despair, and touched his timidly, entreatingly, as if she were calling upon him for pity and help She was, indeed. in her inmost heart, asking him to rescue her from the great dismal swamp of poverty and disrepute ; to take her to himself, and give her a place and status among well-bred people, and make her life worth living.

This was dreadful. Angus Hamleigh, in all the variety of his experience of womankind, had never before found himself face to face with this kind of difficulty. He had not been blind to Miss Vandeleur's strenuous endeavours to charm him. He had parried those light arrows lightly ; but he was painfully embarrassed by this appeal to his compassion. It was a new thing for him to sit beside a weeping woman, whom he could neither love nor admire, but from whom he could not withhold his pity.

'I daresay her life is dismal enough,' he thought, 'with such a brother as Poker Vandeleur—and a father to match.'

While he sat in silent embarrassment, and while Dopsy slowly dried her tears with a gaudy little coloured handkerchief, taken from a smart little breast-pocket in the tailor-gown, Mr. Tregonell sauntered across the room to the window where they sat—a Tudor window, with a deep embrasure.

'What are you two talking about in the dark?' he asked, as Dopsy confusedly shuffled the handkerchief back into the breast-pocket. 'Something very sentimental, I should think, from the look of you. Poetry, I suppose.'

Dopsy said not a word. She believed that Leonard meant well by her—that, if his influence could bring Mr. Hamleigh's nose to the grindstone, to the grindstone that nose would be brought. So she looked up at her brother's friend with a watery smile, and remained mute.

'We were talking about London and the theatres,' answered Angus. 'Not a very sentimental topic ;' and then he got up and walked away with his teacup, to the table near which Christabel was sitting, in the flickering fire-light, and seated himself by her side, and began to talk to her about a box of books that had arrived from London that day—books that were familiar to him and new to her. Leonard looked after him with a scowl, safe in the shadow ; while Dopsy, feeling that she had made a fool of herself, lapsed again into tears.

'I am afraid he is behaving very badly to you,' said Leonard.

'Oh, no, no. But he has such strange ways. He blows hot and cold.'

'In plain words, he's a heartless flirt,' answered Leonard, impatiently. 'He has been fooled by a pack of women—pretends to be dying of consumption—gives himself no end of airs. He has flirted outrageously with you. Has he proposed?'

'No——not exactly,' faltered Dopsy.

'Some one ought to bring him to the scratch. Your brother must tackle him.'

'Don't you think if—if—Jack were to say anything—were just to hint that I was being made very unhappy—that such marked attentions before all the world put me in a false position—don't you think it might do harm?'

'Quite the contrary. It would do good. No man ought to trifle with a girl's feelings in that way. No man shall be allowed to do it in my house. If Jack won't speak to him, I will.'

'Oh, Mr. Tregonell, what a noble heart you have—what a true friend you have always been to us!'

'You are my friend's sister—my wife's guest. I won't see you trifled with.'

'And you really think his attentions have been marked?'

'Very much marked. He shall not be permitted to amuse himself at your expense. There he sits, talking sentiment to my wife—just as he has talked sentiment to you. Why doesn't he keep on the safe side, and confine his attentions to married women?'

'You are not jealous of him?' asked Dopsy, with some alarm.

'Jealous! I! It would take a very extraordinary kind of wife, and a very extraordinary kind of admirer of that wife, to make *me* jealous.'

Dopsy felt her hopes in somewise revived by Mr. Tregonell's manner of looking at things. Up to this point she had mistrusted exceedingly that the flirting was all on her side: but now Leonard most distinctly averred that Angus Hamleigh had flirted, and in a manner obvious to every one. And if Mr. Hamleigh really admired her—if he were really blowing hot and cold—inclining one day to make her his wife, and on another day disposed to let her languish and fade in South Belgravia—might not a word or two from a judicious friend turn the scale, and make her happy for life.

She went up to her room to dress in a flutter of hope and fear; so agitated, that she could scarcely manage the more delicate details of her toilet—the drapery of her skirt, the adjustment of the sunflower on her shoulder.

'How flushed and shaky you are,' exclaimed Mopsy, pausing in the pencilling of an eyebrow to look at her sister. 'Is the deed done? Has he popped?'

'No, he has not popped. But I think he will.'

'I wish I were of your opinion. I should like a rich sister. It would be the next best thing to being well off oneself.'

'You only think of his money,' said Dopsy, who had really fallen in love—for only about the fifteenth time, so there was still freshness in the feeling—'I should care for him just as much if he were a pauper.'

'No, you would not,' said Mopsy. 'I daresay you think you would, but you wouldn't. There is a glamour about money which nobody in our circumstances can resist. A man who dresses perfectly—who has never been hard up—who has always lived among elegant people—there is a style about him that goes straight to one's heart. Don't you remember how in "Peter Wilkins" there are different orders of beings—a superior class—born so, bred so—always apart and above the others? Mr. Hamleigh belongs to that higher order. If he were poor and shabby he would be a different person. You wouldn't care twopence for him.'

The Rector of Trevalga and his wife dined at Mount Royal that evening, so Dopsy fell to the lot of Mr. Hamleigh, and had plenty of opportunity of carrying on the siege during dinner, while Mrs. Tregonell and the Rector, who was an enthusiastic antiquarian, talked of the latest discoveries in Druidic remains.

After dinner came the usual adjournment to billiards. The Rector and his wife stayed in the drawing-room with Christabel and Jessie. Mr. Hamleigh would have remained with them, but Leonard specially invited him to the billiard-room.

'You must have had enough Mendelssohn and Beethoven to last you for the next six months,' he said. 'You had better come and have a smoke with us.'

'I could never have too much good music,' answered Angus.

'Well, I don't suppose you'd get much to-night. The Rector and my wife will talk about pots and pans all the evening, now they've once started. You may as well be sociable, for once-in-a-way, and come with us.'

Such an invitation, given in heartiest tones, and with seeming frankness, could hardly be refused. So Angus went across the hall with the rest of the billiard players, to the fine old room, once a chapel, in which there was pace enough for settees, and easy chairs, tea-tables, books, flowers, and dogs, without the slightest inconvenience to the players.

'You'll play, Hamleigh?' said Leonard.

'No thanks; I'd rather sit and smoke and watch you.'

'Really! Then Monty and I will play Jack and one of the girls. Billiards is the only game at which one can afford to play against relations—they can't cheat. Mopsy, will you play? Dopsy can mark.'

'What a thorough good fellow he is,' thought Dopsy, charmed with an arrangement which left her comparatively free for flirtation with Mr. Hamleigh, who had taken possession of Christabel's favourite seat—a low capacious basket-chair—by the wide wood fire, and had Christabel's table near him, loaded with her books, and work-basket—those books which were all his favourites as well as hers, and which made an indissoluble link between them. What is mere blood relationship compared with the subtler tie of mutual likings and dislikings?

The men all lighted their cigarettes, and the game progressed with tolerably equal fortunes, Jack Vandeleur playing well enough to make amends for any lack of skill on the part of Mopsy, whose want of the scientific purpose and certainty which come from long experience, was as striking as her dashing and self-assured method of handling her cue, and her free use of all slang terms peculiar to the game. Dopsy oscillated between the marking-board and the fireplace—sometimes kneeling on the Persian rug to play with Randie and the other dogs, sometimes standing in a pensive attitude by the chimney-piece, talking to Angus. All traces of tears were gone. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes brightened by an artful touch of Indian ink under the lashes, her eyebrows accentuated by the same artistic treatment, her large fan held with the true Grosvenor Gallery air.

'Do you believe that peacocks' feathers are unlucky?' she asked, looking pensively at the fringe of green and azure plumage on her fan.

'I am not altogether free from superstition, but my idea of the Fates has never taken that particular form. Why should the peacock be a bird of evil omen? I can believe anything bad of the screech-owl or the raven—but the harmless ornamental peacock—surely he is innocent of our woes.'

'I have known the most direful calamities follow the introduction of peacocks' feathers into a drawing-room—yet they are so tempting, one can hardly live without them.'

'Really! Do you know that I have found existence endurable without so much as a tuft of down from that unmelodious bird?'

'Have you never longed for its plumage to give life and colour to your rooms?—such exquisite colour—such delicious harmony—I wonder that you, who have such artistic taste, can resist the fascination.'

'I hope you have not found that pretty fan the cause of many woes?' said Mr. Hamleigh, smilingly, as the damsel posed herself in the early Italian manner, and slowly waved the bright-hued plumage.

'I cannot say that I have been altogether happy since I possessed it,' answered Dopsy, with a shy downward glance, and a smothered sigh; 'and yet I don't know—I have been only too happy sometimes, perhaps, and at other times deeply wretched.'

'Is not that kind of variableness common to our poor human nature—independent of peacocks' feathers?'

'Not to me. I used to be the most thoughtless happy-go-lucky creature.'

'Until when?'

'Till I came to Cornwall,' with a faint sigh, and a sudden upward glance of a pair of blue eyes which would have been pretty, had they been only innocent of all scheming.

'Then I'm afraid this mixture of sea and mountain air does not agree with you. Too exciting for your nerves perhaps.'

'I don't think it is that,' with a still fainter sigh.

'Then the peacocks' feathers must be to blame. Why don't you throw your fan into the fire?'

'Not for worlds,' said Dopsy.

'Why not?'

'First, because it cost a guinea,' naïvely, 'and then because it is associated with quite the happiest period of my life.'

'You said just now you had been unhappy since you owned it.'

'Only by fits and starts. Two utterly happy at other times.'

'If I say another word she will dissolve into tears again,' thought Angus. 'I shall have to leave Mount Royal: a man in weak health is no match for a young woman of this type. She will get me into a corner and declare I have proposed to her.'

He got up and went over to the table, where Mr. Montagu was just finishing the game, with a break which had left Dopsy free for flirtation during the last ten minutes.

Mr. Hamleigh played in the next game, but this hardly bettered his condition, for Dopsy now took her sister's place with the cue, and required to be instructed as to every stroke, and even to have her fingers placed in position, now and then by Angus, when the ball was under the cushion, and the stroke in any way difficult. This lengthened the game, and bored Angus exceedingly, besides making him ridiculous in the eyes of the other three men.

'I hate playing with lovers,' muttered Leonard, under his breath, when Dopsy was especially worrying about the exact point at which she was to hit the ball for a particular cannon.

'Decidedly I must get away to-morrow,' reflected Angus.

The game went on merrily enough, and was only just over when the stable clock struck eleven, at which hour the servants brought in a tray with a tankard of mulled claret for vice, and a siphon for virtue. The Miss Vandeleurs, after pretending to say good-night, were persuaded to sip a little of the hot spiced wine, and were half inclined to accept the cigarettes persuasively offered by Mr. Montagu; till, warned by a wink from Jack, they drew up suddenly, declared they had been quite too awfully dissipated, that they should be too late to wish Mrs. Tregonell good-night, and skipped away.

'Awfully jolly girls, those sisters of yours,' said Montagu, as he closed the door which he had opened for the damsels' exit, and strolled back to the hearth, where Angus was sitting dreamily caressing Randie—her dog! How many a happy dog has received caresses charged with the love of his mistress, such mournful kisses as Dido lavished on the young Ascanias in the dead watches of the weary night.

Jack Vandeleur and his host had begun another game, delighted at having the table to themselves.

'Yes, they're nice girls,' answered Mr. Vandeleur, without looking off the table; 'just the right kind of girls for a country-house: no starch, no prudishness, but as innocent as babies, and as true-hearted—well, they are all heart I should be sorry to see anybody trifle with either of them. It would be a very serious thing for her—and it should be my business to make it serious for him.'

'Great advantage for a girl to have a brother who enjoys the reputation of being a dead shot,' said Mr. Montagu, 'or it would be if duelling were not an exploded institution—like trial for witchcraft, and hanging for petty larceny.'

'Duelling is never out of fashion, among gentlemen,' answered Jack, making a cannon and going in off the red. 'That makes seventeen, Monty. There are injuries which nothing but the pistol can redress, and I'm not sorry that my Red River experience has made me a pretty good shot. But I'm not half as good as Leonard. He could give me fifty in a hundred any day.'

'When a man has to keep his party in butcher's meat by the use of his rifle, he'd need be a decent marksman,' answered Mr. Tregonell, carelessly. 'I never knew the right use of a gun till I crossed the Rockies. By-the-way, who is for woodcock shooting to-morrow? You'll come, I suppose, Jack?'

'Not to-morrow, thanks. Monty and I are going over to Bodmin to see a man hanged. We've got an order to view, as the house-agents call it. Monty is supposed to be on the *Times*. I go for the *Western Daily Mercury*.'

'What a horrid ghoulish thing to do,' said Leonard.

'It's seeing life,' answered Jack, shrugging his shoulders.

'I should call it the other thing. However, as crime is very rare in Cornwall, you may as well make the most of your opportunity. But it's a pity to neglect the birds. This is one of the best seasons we've had since 1860, when there was a remarkable flight of birds in the second week in October. But even that year wasn't as good as '55, when a farmer at St. Buryan killed close upon sixty birds in a week. You'll go to-morrow, I hope, Mr. Hamleigh? There's some very good ground about St. Nectan's Kieve, and it's a picturesque sort of place, that will just hit your fancy.'

'I have been to the Kieve, often—yes, it is a lovely spot,' answered Angus, remembering his first visit to Mount Royal, and the golden afternoons which he had spent with Christabel among the rocks and the ferns, their low voices half drowned by the noise of the waterfall. 'But I shan't be able to shoot to-morrow. I have just been making up my mind to tear myself away from Mount Royal, and I was going to ask you to let one of your grooms drive me over to Launceston in time for the mid-day train. I can get up from Plymouth by the Limited Mail.'

'Why are you in such a hurry?' asked Leonard. 'I thought you were rather enjoying yourself with us.'

'So much so that as far as my own inclination goes there is no reason why I should not stay here for the rest of my life—only you would get tired of me—and I have promised my doctor to go southward before the frosty weather begins.'

'A day or two can't make much difference.'

'Not much—only when there is a disagreeable effort to be made the sooner one gets it over the better.'

'I am sorry you are off so suddenly,' said Leonard, going on with the game, and looking rather oddly across the table at Captain Vandeleur.

'I am more than sorry,' said that gentleman, 'I am surprised. But perhaps I am not altogether in the secret of your movements.'

'There is no secret,' said Angus.

'Isn't there? Then I'm considerably mistaken. It has looked very much lately as if there were a particular understanding between you and my elder sister; and I think, as her brother, I have some right to be let into the secret before you leave Mount Royal.'

'I am sorry that either my manner, or Miss Vandeleur's should have so far misled you,' answered Angus, with freezing gravity He pitied the sister, but felt only cold contempt for the brother. 'The young lady and I have never interchanged a word which might not have been heard by everybody at Mount Royal.'

'And you have had no serious intentions—you have never pretended to any serious feeling about her?'

'Never. Charming as the young lady may be, I have been, and am, adamant against all such fascinations. A man who has been told that he may not live a year is hardly in a position to make an offer of marriage. Good-night, Tregonell. I shall rely on your letting one of your men drive me to the station.'

He nodded good-night to the other two men, and left the room. Randie, who loved him for the sake of old times, followed at his heels.

'There goes a cur who deserves a dose of cold lead,' said Jack, looking vindictively towards the door.

'What, Randie, my wife's favourite?'

'No, the two-legged cur. Come, you two men know how outrageously that puppy has flirted with my sister.'

'I know there has been—some kind of flirtation,' answered

Mr. Montagu, luxuriously buried in a large arm-chair, with his legs hanging over the arm, 'and I suppose it's the man who's to blame. Of course it always is the man.'

'Did you ever hear such a sneaking evasion?' demanded Jack, 'Not a year to live forsooth. Why if he can't make her his wife he is bound as a gentleman to make her his widow.'

'He has plenty of coin, hasn't he?' asked Montagu. 'Your sister has never gone for me—and I'm dreadfully soft under such treatment. When I think of the number of girls I've proposed to, and how gracefully I've always backed out of it afterwards, I really wonder at my own audacity. I never refuse to marry the lady—*pas si bête:* "I adore you, and we'll be married to-morrow if you like," I say. "But you'll have to live with your papa and mamma for the first ten years. Perhaps by that time I might be able to take second-floor lodgings in Bloomsbury, and we could begin housekeeping."'

'You're a privileged pauper,' said Captain Vandeleur; 'Mr. Hamleigh is quite another kind of individual—and I say that he has behaved in a dastardly manner to my elder sister. Everybody in this house thought that he was in love with her.'

'You have told us so several times,' answered Montagu, coolly, 'and we're bound to believe you, don't you know.'

'I should have thought you'd have had too much spunk to see an old friend's sister jilted in such a barefaced way, Tregonell,' said Jack Vandeleur, who had drunk just enough to make him quarrelsome.

'You don't mean to say that I am accountable for his actions, do you?' retorted Leonard. 'That's rather a large order.'

'I mean to say that you asked him here—and you puffed him off as a great catch—and half turned poor little Dop's head by your talk about him. If you knew what an arrant flirt he was you oughtn't to have brought him inside your doors.'

'Perhaps I didn't know anything about it,' answered Leonard, with his most exasperating air.

'Then I can only say that if half I've heard is true you ought to have known all about it.'

'As how?'

'Because it is common club-talk that he flirted with your wife—was engaged to her—and was thrown off by her on account of his extremely disreputable antecedents. Your mother has the sole credit of the throwing off, by-the-by.'

'You had better leave my mother's name and my wife's name out of your conversation. That's twenty-eight to me, Monty. Poker has spoiled a capital break by his d——d personality.'

'I beg your pardon—Mrs. Tregonell is simply perfect, and there is no woman I more deeply honour. But still you must allow me to wonder that you ever let that man cross your threshold.'

'You are welcome to go on wondering. It's a wholesome exercise for a sluggish brain.'

'Game,' exclaimed Mr. Montague; and Leonard put his cue in the rack, and walked away, without another word to either of his guests.

'He's a dreadful bear,' said little Monty, emptying the tankard; 'but you oughtn't to have talked about the wife, Poker—that was bad form.'

'Does he ever study good form when he talks of my people? He had no business to bring that fine gentleman here to flirt with my sister.'

'But really now, don't you think your sister did her share of the flirting, and that she's rather an old hand at that kind of thing? I adore Dop and Mop, as I'm sure you know, and I only wish I were rich enough to back my opinion by marrying one of them—but I don't think our dear little Dopsy is the kind of girl to break her heart about any man—more especially a sentimental duffer with hollow cheeks and a hollow cough.'

CHAPTER XXI.

'AND TIME IS SETTING WI' ME, O.'

ANGUS HAMLEIGH left the billiard players with the intention of going straight to his own room; but in the hall he encountered the Rector of Trevalga, who was just going away, very apologetic at having stayed so late, beguiled by the fascination of antiquarian talk. Christabel and Jessie had come out to the hall, to bid their old friends good-night, and thus it happened that Mr. Hamleigh went back to the drawing-room, and sat there talking till nearly midnight. They sat in front of the dying fire, talking as they had talked in days gone by—and their conversation grew sad and solemn as the hour wore on. Angus announced his intended departure, and Christabel had no word to say against his decision.

'We shall be very sorry to lose you,' she said, sheltering her personality behind the plural pronoun, 'but I think it is wise of you to waste no more time.'

'I have not wasted an hour. It has been unspeakable happiness for me to be here—and I am more grateful than I can say to your husband for having brought me here—for having treated me with such frank cordiality. The time has come when I may speak very freely—yes—a man whose race is so nearly run need have no reserves of thought or feeling. I think, Mrs. Tregonell, that you and Miss Bridgeman, who knows me almost as well as you do——'

'Better, perhaps,' murmured Jessie, in a scarcely audible voice.

'Must both know that my life for the past four years has been one long regret—that all my days and hours have been steeped in the bitterness of remorse. I am not going now to dispute the justice of the sentence which spoiled my life and broke my heart. I submitted without question, because I knew that the decree was wise. I had no right to offer you the ruin of a life——'

'Do not speak of that,' cried Christabel, with a stifled sob, 'for pity's sake don't speak of the past: I cannot bear it.'

'Then I will not say another word, except to tell you that your goodness to me in these latter days—your friendship, so frankly, so freely given—has steeped my soul in peace—has filled my mind with sweet memories which will soothe my hours of decline, when I am far from this dear house where I was once so happy. I wish I could leave some pleasant memory here when I am gone—I wish your boy had been old enough to remember me in the days to come, as one who loved him better than any one on earth could love him, after his father and mother.'

Christabel answered no word. She sat with her hand before her eyes—tears streaming slowly down her cheeks—tears that were happily invisible in the faint light of the shaded lamps and the fading fire.

And then they went on to talk of life in the abstract—its difficulties—its problems—its consolations—and of death—and the dim world beyond—the unknown land of universal recompense, where the deep joys striven after here, and never attained, are to be ours in a purer and more spiritual form—where love shall no longer walk hand in hand with pain and sorrow, dogged by the dark spectre Death.

Illness and solitude had done much to exalt and spiritualize Angus Hamleigh's mind. The religion of dogma, the strict hard-and-fast creed which was the breath of life to Leonard's mother, had never been grappled with or accepted by him—but it was in his nature to be religious. Never at his worst had he sheltered his errors under the brazen front of paganism—never had he denied the beauty of a pure and perfect life, a simple childlike faith, heroic self-abnegating love of God and man. He had admired and honoured such virtue in others, and had been sorry that Nature had cast him in a lower mould. Then had come the sentence which told him that his days were to be of the fewest, and, without conscious effort, his thoughts had taken a more serious cast. The great problem had come nearer home to him—and he had found its only solution to be hope—hope more or less vague and dim—more or less secure and steadfast—according to the temperament of the thinker. All metaphysical argument for or against—all theological teaching could push the thing no further. It seemed to him that it was the universal instinct of mankind to desire and hope for an imperishable life, purer, better, fairer than the life we know here—and that innate in every human breast there dwells capacity for immortality, and disbelief in extinction—and to this universal instinct he surrendered himself unreservedly, content to demand no stronger argument than that grand chapter of Corinthians which has consoled so many generations of mourners.

So now, speaking with these two women of the life to come—the fair, sweet, all-satisfying life after death—he breathed no word which the most orthodox churchman might not have approved. He spoke in the fulness of a faith which, based on instinct, and not on dogma, had ripened with the decline of all delight and interest in this lower life. He spoke as a man for whom earth's last moorings had been loosened, whose only hopes pointed skyward.

It was while he was talking thus, with an almost passionate earnestness, and yet wholly free from all earthly passion, that Mr. Tregonell entered the room and stood by the door, contemplating the group by the hearth. The spectacle was not pleasant to a man of intensely jealous temperament, a man who had been testing and proving the wife whom he could not completely trust, whom he loved grudgingly, with a savage half-angry love.

Christabel's face, dimly lighted by the lamp on the low table near her, was turned towards the speaker, the lips parted, the large blue eyes bright with emotion. Her hands were clasped upon the elbow of the chair, and her attitude was of one who listens to words of deepest, dearest meaning; while Angus Hamleigh sat a little way off with his eyes upon her face, his whole air and expression charged with feeling. To Leonard's mind all such earnestness, all sentiment of any kind, came under one category: it all meant love-making, more or less audacious, more or less hypocritical, dressed in modern phraseology, sophisticated, disguised, super-refined, fantastical, called one day æstheticism and peacocks' feathers, another day positivism, agnosticism, Swinburne-cum-Burne-Jones-ism, but always the same thing *au fond*, and meaning war to domestic peace. There sat Jessie Bridgeman, the dragon of prudery placed within call, but was any woman safer for the presence of a duenna? was it not in the nature of such people to look on simperingly while the poison cup was being quaffed, and to declare afterwards that they had supposed the mixture perfectly harmless? No doubt, Tristan and Iseult had somebody standing by to play propriety when they drank from the fatal goblet, and bound themselves for life in the meshes of an unhappy love. No, the mere fact of Miss Bridgeman's presence was no pledge of safety.

There was no guilt in Mrs. Tregonell's countenance, assuredly, when she looked up and saw her husband standing near the door, watchful, silent, with a pre-occupied air that was strange to him.

'What is the matter, Leonard?' she asked, for his manner implied that something was amiss.

'Nothing—I—I was wondering to find you up so late—that's all.'

'The Rector and his wife stayed till eleven, and we have been sitting here talking. Mr. Hamleigh means to leave us to-morrow.'

'Yes, I know,' answered Leonard, curtly. 'Oh, by the way,' turning to Angus, 'there is something I want to say to you before you go to bed; something about your journey to-morrow.'

'I am quite at your service.'

Instead of approaching the group by the fireplace, Leonard turned and left the room, leaving Mr. Hamleigh under the necessity of following him.

'Good-night,' he said, shaking hands with Christabel. 'I shall not say good-bye till to-morrow. I suppose I shall not have to leave Mount Royal till eleven o'clock.'

'I think not.'

'Good-night, Miss Bridgeman. I shall never forget how kind you have been to me.'

She looked at him earnestly, but made no reply, and in the next instant he was gone.

'What can have happened?' asked Christabel, anxiously. 'I am sure there is something wrong. Leonard's manner was so strange.'

'Perhaps he and his dear friends have been quarrelling,' Jessie answered, carelessly. 'I believe Captain Vandeleur breaks out into vindictive language, sometimes, after he has taken a little too much wine: Mop told me as much in her amiable candour. And I know the Captain's glass was filled very often at dinner, for I had the honour of sitting next him.'

'I hope there is nothing really wrong,' said Christabel; but she could not get rid of the sense of uneasiness to which Leonard's strange manner had given rise.

She went to her boy's nursery, as she did every night, before going to bed, and said her prayers beside his pillow. She had begun this one night when the child was ill, and had never missed a night since. That quiet recess in which the little one's cot stood was her oratory. Here, in the silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock or the fall of a cinder on the hearth, while the nurse slept near at hand, the mother prayed; and her prayers seemed to her sweeter and more efficacious here than in any other place. So soon as those childish lips could speak it would be her delight to teach her son to pray; and, in the meantime, her supplications went up to Heaven for him, from a heart that overflowed with motherly love. There had been one dismal interval of her life when she had loved no one—having really no one to love—secretly loathing her husband—not daring even to remember that other, once so fondly loved—and then, when her desolate heart seemed walled round with an icy barrier that divided it from all human feeling, God had given her this child, and lo! the ice had melted, and her re-awakened soul had kindled and glowed with warmth and gladness. It was not in Christabel's nature to love many things, or many people: rather was it natural to her to love one person intensely, as she had loved her adopted mother in her girlhood, as she had loved Angus Hamleigh in the bloom of her womanhood, as she loved her boy now.

She was leaving the child's room, after prayers and meditations that had been somewhat longer than usual, when she heard voices, and saw Mr. Tregonell and Mr. Hamleigh by the door of the room occupied by the latter, which was at the further end of the gallery.

'You understand my plan?' said Leonard.

'Perfectly.'

'It prevents all trouble, don't you see.'

'Yes, I believe it may,' answered Angus, and without any word of good-night he opened his door and went into his room, while Leonard turned on his heel and strolled to his own quarters.

'Was there anything amiss between you and Mr. Hamleigh, that you parted so coldly just now?' asked Christabel, presently, when her husband came from his dressing-room into the bedroom where she sat musing by the fire.

'What, aren't you gone to bed yet!' he exclaimed. 'You seem to be possessed by a wakeful demon to-night.'

'I have been in the boy's room. *Was* there anything amiss, Leonard?'

'You are monstrously anxious about it. No. What should there be amiss? You didn't expect to see us hugging each other like a couple of Frenchmen, did you?'

CHAPTER XXII.

'WITH SUCH REMORSELESS SPEED STILL COME NEW WOES.'

The next morning was damp, and grey, and mild, no autumn wind stirring the long sweeping branches of the cedars on the lawn, the dead leaves falling silently, the world all sad and solemn, clad in universal greyness. Christabel was up early, with her boy, in the nursery—watching him as he splashed about his bath, and emerged rosy and joyous, like an infant river-god sporting among the rushes; early at family prayers in the dining-room, a ceremony at which Mr. Tregonell rarely assisted, and to which Dopsy and Mopsy came flushed and breathless with hurry, anxious to pay all due respect to a hostess whom they hoped to visit again, but inwardly revolting against the unreasonableness of eight-o'clock prayers.

Angus, who was generally about the gardens before eight, did not appear at all this morning. The other men were habitually late—breakfasting together in a free-and-easy manner when the ladies had left the dining-room—so Christabel, Miss Bridgeman, and the Miss Vandeleurs sat down to breakfast alone, Dopsy giving little furtive glances at the door every now and then, expectant of Mr. Hamleigh's entrance.

That expectancy became too painful for the damsel's patience, by-and-by, as the meal advanced.

'I wonder what has become of Mr. Hamleigh,' she said. 'This is the first time he has been late at breakfast.'

'Perhaps he is seeing to the packing of his portmanteau,' said Miss Bridgeman. 'Some valets are bad packers, and want superintendence.'

'Packing!' cried Dopsy, aghast. 'Packing! What for?'

'He is going to London this afternoon. Didn't you know?'

Dopsy grew pale as ashes. The shock was evidently terrible, and even Jessie pitied her.

'Poor silly Dop,' she thought. 'Could she actually suppose that she stood the faintest chance of bringing down her bird?'

'Going away? For good?' murmured Miss Vandeleur, faintly—all the flavour gone out of the dried salmon, the Cornish butter, the sweet home-baked bread.

'I hope so. He is going to the South of France for the winter. Of course, you know that he is consumptive, and has not many years to live,' answered Miss Bridgeman.

'Poor fellow!' sighed Dopsy, with tears glittering upon her lowered eyelids.

She had begun the chase moved chiefly by sordid instincts;

her tenderest emotions had been hacked and vulgarized by long experience in flirtation—but at this moment she believed that never in her life had she loved before, and that never in her life could she love again.

'And if he dies unmarried what will become of his property?' inquired Mopsy, whose feelings were not engaged.

'I haven't the faintest idea,' answered Miss Bridgeman. 'He has no near relations. I hope he will leave his money to some charitable institution.'

'What time does he go?' faltered Dopsy, swallowing her tears.

'Mr. Hamleigh left an hour ago, Madam,' said the butler, who had been carving at the side-board during this conversation. 'He has gone shooting. The dog-cart is to pick him up at the gate leading to St. Nectan's Kieve at eleven o'clock.'

'Gone shooting on his last morning at Mount Royal!' exclaimed Jessie. 'That's a new development of Mr. Hamleigh's character. I never knew he had a passion for sport.'

'I believe there is a note for you, ma'am,' said the butler to his mistress.

He went out into the hall, and returned in a minute or two carrying a letter upon his official salver, and handing it with official solemnity to Mrs. Tregonell.

The letter was brief and commonplace enough—

'DEAR MRS. TREGONELL,—

'After all I am deprived of the opportunity of wishing you good-bye this morning, by the temptation of two or three hours' woodcock shooting about St. Nectan's Kieve. I shall drive straight from there to Launceston in Mr. Tregonell's dog-cart, for the use of which I beg to thank him in advance. I have already thanked you and Miss Bridgeman for your goodness to me during my late visit to Mount Royal, and can only say that my gratitude lies much deeper, and means a great deal more, than such expressions of thankfulness are generally intended to convey.

'Ever sincerely yours,

'ANGUS HAMLEIGH.'

'Then this was what Leonard and he were settling last night, thought Christabel. 'Your master went out with Mr. Hamleigh, I suppose,' she said to the servant.

'No, ma'am, my master is in his study. I took him his breakfast an hour ago. He is writing letters, I believe.'

'And the other two gentlemen?'

'Started for Bodmin in the wagonette at six o'clock this morning.'

'They are going to see that unhappy man hanged,' said Miss Bridgeman. 'Congenial occupation. Mr. Montagu told me all about it at dinner yesterday, and asked me if I wasn't sorry that my sex prevented my joining the party. "It would be a new sensation," he said, "and to a woman of your intelligence that must be an immense attraction." I told him I had no hankering after new sensations of that kind.'

'And he is really gone—without saying good-bye to any of us,' said Dopsy, still harping on the departed guest.

'Yes, he is really gone,' echoed Jessie, with a sigh.

Christabel had been silent and absent-minded throughout the meal. Her mind was troubled—she scarcely knew why; disturbed by the memory of her husband's manner as he parted with Angus in the corridor; disturbed by the strangeness of this lonely expedition after woodcock, in a man who had always shown himself indifferent to sport. As usual with her when she was out of spirits, she went straight to the nursery for comfort, and tried to forget everything in life except that Heaven had given her a son whom she adored.

Her boy upon this particular morning was a little more fascinating and a shade more exacting than usual; the rain, soft and gentle as it was—rather an all-pervading moisture than a positive rainfall—forbade any open-air exercise for this tenderly reared young person—so he had to be amused indoors. He was just of an age to be played with, and to understand certain games which called upon the exercise of a dawning imagination; so it was his mother's delight to ramble with him in an imaginary wood, and to fly from imaginary wolves, lurking in dark caverns, represented by the obscure regions underneath a table-cover—or to repose with him on imaginary mountain-tops on the sofa—or be engulfed with him in sofa pillows, which stood for whelming waves. Then there were pictures to be looked at, and little Leo had to be lovingly instructed in the art of turning over a leaf without tearing it from end to end—and the necessity for restraining an inclination to thrust all his fingers into his mouth between whiles, and sprawl them admiringly on the page afterwards.

Time so beguiled, even on the dullest morning, and with a lurking, indefinite sense of trouble in her mind all the while, went rapidly with Christabel. She looked up with surprise when the stable clock struck eleven.

'So late? Do you know if the dog-cart has started yet, Carson?'

'Yes, ma'am, I heard it drive out of the yard half-an-hour ago,' answered the nurse, looking up from her needle-work.

'Well, I must go. Good-bye, Baby. I think, if you are very good, you might have your dinner with mamma. Din-din—with—mum—mum—mum'—a kiss between every nonsense syllable. 'You can bring him down, nurse. I shall have only the ladies with me at luncheon.' There were still further leave-takings, and then Christabel went downstairs. On her way past her husband's study she saw the door standing ajar.

'Are you there, Leonard, and alone?'

'Yes.'

She went in. He was sitting at his desk—his cheque-book open, tradesmen's accounts spread out before him—all the signs and tokens of business-like occupation. It was not often that Mr. Tregonell spent a morning in his study. When he did, it meant a general settlement of accounts, and usually resulted in a surly frame of mind, which lasted, more or less, for the rest of the day.

'Did you know that Mr. Hamleigh had gone woodcock shooting?'

'Naturally, since it was I who suggested that he should have a shy at the birds before he left,' answered Leonard, without looking up.

He was filling in a cheque, with his head bent over the table.

'How strange for him to go alone, in his weak health, and with a fatiguing journey before him.'

'What's the fatigue of lolling in a railway carriage? Confound it, you've made me spoil the cheque!' muttered Leonard, tearing the oblong slip of coloured paper across and across, impatiently.

'How your hand shakes! Have you been writing all the morning?'

'Yes—all the morning,' absently, turning over the leaves of his cheque-book.

'But you have been out—your boots are all over mud.'

'Yes, I meant to have an hour or so at the birds. I got as far as Willapark, and then remembered that Clayton wanted the money for the tradesmen to-day. One must stick to one's pay-day, don't you know, when one has made a rule.'

'Of course. Oh, there are the new Quarterlies!' said Christabel, seeing a package on the table. 'Do you mind my opening them here?'

'No; as long as you hold your tongue, and don't disturb me when I'm at figures.'

This was not a very gracious permission to remain, but Christabel seated herself quietly by the fire, and began to explore the two treasuries of wisdom which the day's post had brought. Leonard's study looked into the stable-yard, a spacious quadrangle, with long ranges of doors and windows, saddle rooms, harness rooms, loose boxes, coachmen's and groom's quarters—a little colony complete in itself. From his open window the Squire could give his orders, interrogate his coachman as to his consumption of forage, have an ailing horse paraded before him, bully an underling, and bestow praise or blame all round, as it suited his humour. Here, too, were the kennels of the dogs, whose company Mr. Tregonell liked a little better than that of his fellow-men.

Leonard sat with his head bent over the table, writing, Christabel in her chair by the fire turning the leaves of her book in the rapture of a first skimming. They sat thus for about an hour, and then both looked up with a startled air, at the sound of wheels.

It was the dog-cart that was being driven into the yard, Mr. Hamleigh's servant sitting behind, walled in by a portmanteau and a Gladstone bag. Leonard opened the window, and looked out.

'What's up?' he asked. 'Has your master changed his mind?'

The valet alighted, and came across the yard to the window.

'We haven't seen Mr. Hamleigh, sir. There must have been some mistake, I think. We waited at the gate for nearly an hour, and then Baker said we'd better come back, as we must have missed Mr. Hamleigh, somehow, and he might be here waiting for us to take him to Launceston.'

'Baker's a fool. How could you miss him if he went to the Kieve? There's only one way out of that place—or only one way that Mr. Hamleigh could find. Did you inquire if he went to the Kieve?'

'Yes, sir. Baker went into the farmhouse, and they told him that a gentleman had come with his gun and a dog, and had asked for the key, and had gone to the Kieve alone. They were not certain as to whether he'd come back or not, but he hadn't taken the key back to the house. He might have put it into his pocket, and forgotten all about it, don't you see, sir, after he'd let himself out of the gate. That's what Baker said; and he might have come back here.'

'Perhaps he has come back,' answered Leonard, carelessly. 'You'd better inquire.'

'I don't think he can have returned,' said Christabel, standing near the window, very pale.

'How do you know?' asked Leonard, savagely. 'You've been sitting here for the last hour poring over that book.'

'I think I should have heard—I think I should have known,' faltered Christabel, with her heart beating strangely.

There was a mystery in the return of the carriage which seemed like the beginning of woe and horror—like the ripening of that strange vague sense of trouble which had oppressed her for the last few hours.

'You would have heard—you would have known,' echoed her husband, with brutal mockery—'by instinct, by second sight, by animal magnetism, I suppose. You are just the sort of woman to believe in that kind of rot.'

The valet had gone across the yard on his way round to the offices of the house. Christabel made no reply to her husband's sneering speech, but went straight to the hall, and rang for the butler.

'Have you—has any one seen Mr. Hamleigh come back to the house?' she asked.

'No, ma'am.'

'Inquire, if you please, of every one. Make quite sure that he has not returned, and then let three or four men, with Nicholls at their head, go down to St. Nectan's Kieve and look for him. I'm afraid there has been an accident.'

'I hope not, ma'am,' answered the butler, who had known Christabel from her babyhood, who had looked on, a pleased spectator, at Mr. Hamleigh's wooing, and whose heart was melted with tenderest compassion to-day at the sight of her pallid face, and eyes made large with terror. 'It's a dangerous kind of place for a stranger to go clambering about with a gun, but not for one that knows every stone of it, as Mr. Hamleigh do.'

'Send, and at once, please. I do not think Mr. Hamleigh, having arranged for the dog-cart to meet him, would forget his appointment.'

'There's no knowing, ma'am. Some gentlemen are so wrapt up in their sport.'

Christabel sat down in the hall, and waited while Daniel, the butler, made his inquiries. No one had seen Mr. Hamleigh come in, and everybody was ready to aver on oath if necessary that he had not returned. So Nicholls, the chief coachman, a man of gumption and of much renown in the household, as a person whose natural sharpness had been improved by the large responsibilities involved in a well-filled stable, was brought to receive his orders from Mrs. Tregonell. Daniel admired the calm gravity with which she gave the man his instructions, despite her colourless cheek and the look of pain in every feature of her face.

'You will take two or three of the stablemen with you, and go as fast as you can to the Kieve. You had better go in the light cart, and it would be as well to take a mattress, and some pillows. If—if there should have been an accident those might be useful. Mr. Hamleigh left the house early this morning with his gun to go to the Kieve, and he was to have met the dog-cart at eleven. Baker waited at the gate till twelve—but perhaps you have heard.'

'Yes, ma'am, Baker told me. It's strange—but Mr. Hamleigh may have overlooked the time if he had good sport. Do you know which of the dogs he took with him?'

'No. Why do you ask?'

'Because I rather thought it was Sambo. Sambo was always a favourite of Mr. Hamleigh's, though he's getting rather too old for his work now. If it was Sambo the dog must have run away and left him, for he was back about the yard before ten o'clock. He'd been hurt somehow, for there was blood upon one of his feet. Master had the red setter with him this morning, when he went for his stroll, but I believe it must have been Sambo that Mr. Hamleigh took. There was only one of the lads about the yard when he left, for it was breakfast time, and the little guffin didn't notice.'

'But if all the other dogs are in their kennels—'

'They aren't, ma'am, don't you see. The two gentlemen took a couple of 'em to Bodmin in the break—and I don't know which. Sambo may have been with them—and may have got tired of it and come home. He's not a dog to appreciate that kind of thing.'

'Go at once, if you please, Nicholls. You know what to do.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Nicholls went his way, and the gong began to sound for luncheon. Mr. Tregonell, who rarely honoured the family with his presence at the mid-day meal, came out of his den to-day in answer to the summons, and found his wife in the hall.

'I suppose you are coming in to luncheon,' he said to her, in an angry aside. 'You need not look so scared. Your old lover is safe enough, I daresay.'

'I am not coming to luncheon,' she answered, looking at him with pale contempt. 'If you are not a little more careful of your words I may never break bread with you again.'

The gong went on with its discordant clamour, and Jessie Bridgeman came out of the drawing-room with the younger Miss Vandeleur. Poor Dopsy was shut in her own room, with a headache. She had been indulging herself with the feminine luxury of a good cry. Disappointment, wounded vanity, humiliation, and a very real *penchant* for the man who had despised her attractions were the mingled elements in her cup of woe.

The nurse came down the broad oak staircase, baby Leonard toddling by her side, and making two laborious jumps at each shallow step—one on—one off. Christabel met him, picked him up in her arms, and carried him back to the nursery, where she ordered his dinner to be brought. He was a little inclined to resist this change of plan at the first, but was soon kissed into pleasantness, and then the nurse was despatched to the servants' hall, and Christabel had her boy to herself, and ministered to him and amused him for the space of an hour, despite an aching heart. Then, when the nurse came back, Mrs. Tregonell went to her own room, and sat at the window watching the avenue by which the men must drive back to the house.

They did not come back till just when the gloom of the sunless day was deepening into starless night. Christabel ran down to the lobby that opened into the stable yard, and stood in the doorway waiting for Nicholls to come to her; but if he saw her, he pretended not to see her, and went straight to the house by another way, and asked to speak to Mr. Tregonell.

Christabel saw him hurry across the yard to that other door, and knew that her fears were realized. Evil of some kind had befallen. She went straight to her husband's study, certain that she would meet Nicholls there.

Leonard was standing by the fireplace, listening, while Nicholls stood a little way from the door, relating the result of his search, in a low agitated voice.

'Was he quite dead when you found him?' asked Leonard, when the man paused in his narration.

Christabel stood just within the doorway, half hidden in the obscurity of the room, where there was no light but that of the low fire. The door had been left ajar by Nicholls, and neither he nor his master was aware of her presence.

'Yes, Sir. Dr. Blake said he must have been dead some hours.'

'Had the gun burst?'

'No, sir. It must have gone off somehow. Perhaps the trigger caught in the hand-rail when he was crossing the wooden bridge—and yet that seemed hardly possible—for he was lying on the big stone at the other side of the bridge, with his face downwards close to the water.'

'A horrible accident,' said Leonard. 'There'll be an inquest, of course. Will Blake give the Coroner notice—or must I?'

'Dr. Blake said he'd see to that, sir.'

'And he is lying at the farm—'

'Yes, sir. We thought it was best to take the body there—rather than to bring it home. It would have been such a shock for my mistress—and the other ladies. Dr. Blake said the inquest would be held at the inn at Trevena.'

'Well,' said Leonard, with a shrug and a sigh, 'it's an awful business; that's all that can be said about it. Lucky he has no wife or children—no near relations to feel the blow. All we can do is to show our respect for him, now he is gone. The body had better be brought home here, after the inquest. It will look more respectful for him to be buried from this house. Mrs. Tregonell's mind can be prepared by that time.'

'It is prepared already,' said a low voice out of the shadow. 'I have heard all.'

'Very sad, isn't it?' replied Leonard; 'one of those unlucky accidents which occur every shooting season. He was always a little awkward with a gun—never handled one like a thoroughbred sportsman.'

'Why did he go out shooting on the last morning of his visit?' asked Christabel. 'It was you who urged him to do it—you who planned the whole thing.'

'I! What nonsense you are talking. I told him there were plenty of birds about the Kieve—just as I told the other fellows. That will do, Nicholls. You did all that could be done. Go and get your dinner, but first send a mounted groom to Trevena to ask Blake to come over here.'

Nicholls bowed and retired, shutting the door behind him.

'He is dead, then,' said Christabel, coming over to the hearth where her husband was standing. 'He has been killed.'

'He has had the bad luck to kill himself, as many a better sportsman than he has done before now,' answered Leonard, roughly.

'If I could be sure of that Leonard, if I could be sure that his death was the work of accident—I should hardly grieve for him—knowing that he was reconciled to the idea of death—and that if God had spared him this sudden end, the close of his life must have been full of pain and weariness.'

Tears were streaming down her cheeks—tears which she made no effort to restrain—such tears as friendship and affection give to the dead—tears that had no taint of guilt. But Leonard's jealous soul was stung to fury by those innocent tears.

'Why do you stand there snivelling about him,' he exclaimed; 'do you want to remind me how fond you were of him—and how little you ever cared for me. Do you suppose I am stone blind—do you suppose I don't know you to the core of your heart?'

'If you know my heart you must know that it is as guiltless of sin against you, and as true to my duty as a wife, as you, my husband, can desire. But you must know that, or you would not have brought Angus Hamleigh to this house.'

'Perhaps I wanted to try you—to watch you and him together—to see if the old fire was quite burnt out.'

'You could not be so base—so contemptible.'

'There is no knowing what a man may be when he is used as I have been by you—looked down upon from the height of a superior intellect, a loftier nature—told to keep his distance, as a piece of vulgar clay—hardly fit to exist beside that fine porcelain vase, his wife. Do you think it was a pleasant spectacle for me to see you and Angus Hamleigh sympathizing and twaddling about Browning's last poem—or sighing over a sonata of Beethoven's—I who was outside all that kind of thing?—a boor—a dolt—to whom your fine sentiments and your flummery were an unknown language. But I was only putting a case just now. I liked Hamleigh well enough—in his way—and I asked him here because I thought it was giving a chance to the Vandeleur girls. That was my motive—and my only motive.'

'And he came—and he is dead,' answered Christabel, in icy tones. 'He went to that lonely place this morning—at your instigation—and he met his death there—no one knows how—no one ever will know.'

'At my instigation?—confound it, Christabel—you have no right to say such things. I told him it was a good place for woodcock—and it pleased his fancy to try his luck there before he left. Lonely place, be hanged. It is a place to which every tourist goes—it is as well known as the road to this house.'

'Yet he was lying there for hours and no one knew. If Nicholls had not gone he might be lying there still. He may have lain there wounded—his life-blood ebbing away—dying by inches—without help—with a creature to succour or comfort him. It was a cruel place—a place where no help could come.'

'Fortune of war,' answered Leonard, with a careless shrug. 'A sportsman must die where his shot finds him. There's many a day I might have fallen in the Rockies, and lain there for the lynxes and the polecats to pick my bones; and I have walked shoulder to shoulder with death on mountain passes, when every step on the crumbling track might send me sliding down to the bottomless pit below. As for poor Hamleigh; well, as you say yourself, he was a doomed man—a little sooner or later could not make much difference.'

'Perhaps not,' said Christabel gloomily, going slowly to the door; 'but I want to know how he died.'

'Let us hope that the coroner's inquest will make your mind easy on that point,' retorted her husband as she left the room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

'YOURS ON MONDAY, GOD'S TO-DAY.'

THE warning gong sounded at half-past seven as usual, and at eight the butler announced dinner. Captain Vandeleur and Mr. Montagu had returned from Bodmin, and they were grouped in front of the fire talking in undertones with Mr. Tregonell, while Christabel and the younger Miss Vandeleur sat on a sofa, silent, after a few murmured expressions of grief on on the part of the latter lady.

'It is like a dream,' sighed Mopsy, this being the one remark which a young person of her calibre inevitably makes upon such an occasion. 'It is like a dreadful dream—playing billiards last night, and now—dead! It is too awful.'

'Yes, it is awful; Death is always awful,' answered Christabel, mechanically.

She had told herself that it was her duty to appear at the dinner-table—to fulfil all her responsibilities as wife and hostess—not to give any one the right to say that she was bemoaning him who had once been her lover; and she was here to do her duty. She wanted all the inhabitants of her little world to see that she mourned for him only as a friend grieves for the loss of a friend—soberly, with pious submission to the Divine Will that had taken him away. For two hours she had remained on her knees beside her bed, drowned in tears, numbed by despair, feeling as if life could not go on without him, as if this heavily beating heart of hers must be slowly throbbing to extinction: and then the light of reason had begun to glimmer through the thick gloom of grief, and her lips had moved in prayer, and, as if in answer to her prayers, came the image of her child, to comfort and sustain her.

'Let me not dishonour my darling,' she prayed. 'Let me remember that I am a mother as well as a wife. If I owe my husband very little, I owe my son everything.'

Inspired by that sweet thought of her boy, unwilling, for his sake, to give occasion for even the feeblest scandal, she had washed the tears from her pale cheeks, and put on a dinner gown, and had gone down to the drawing-room just ten minutes before the announcement of dinner.

She remembered how David, when his beloved was dead, had risen and washed and gone back to the business of life. 'What use are my tears to him, now he is gone?' she said to herself, as she went downstairs.

Miss Bridgeman was not in the drawing-room; but Mopsy was there, dressed in black, and looking very miserable.

'I could not get poor Dop to come down,' she said, apologetically. 'She has been lying on her bed crying ever since she heard the dreadful news. She is so sensitive, poor girl; and she liked him so much; and he had been so attentive to her. I hope you'll excuse her?'

'Please don't apologize. I can quite imagine that this shock has been dreadful for her—for every one in the house. Perhaps you would rather dine upstairs, so as to be with your sister?'

'No!' answered Mopsy, taking Christabel's hand, with a touch of real feeling. 'I had rather be with you. You must feel his loss more than we can—you had known him so much longer.'

'Yes, it is just five years since he came to Mount Royal. Five years is not much in the lives of some people; but it seems the greater part of my life.'

'We will go away to-morrow,' said Mopsy. 'I am sure you will be glad to get rid of us: it will be a relief, I mean. Perhaps at some future time you will let us come again for a little while. We have been so intensely happy here.'

'Then I shall be happy for you to come again—next summer, if we are here,' answered Christabel, kindly, moved by Mopsy's *naïveté*, 'one can never tell. Next year seems so far off in the hour of trouble.'

Dinner was announced, and they all went in, and made believe to dine, in a gloomy silence, broken now and then by dismal attempts at general conversation on the part of the men. Once Mopsy took heart of grace and addressed her brother:

'Did you like the hanging, Jack?' she asked, as if it were a play.

'No, it was hideous, detestable. I will never put myself in the way of being so tortured again. The guillotine is swifter and more merciful. I saw a man blown from a gun in India—there were bits of him on my boots when I got home—but it was not so bad as the hanging to-day: the limp, helpless figure, swaying and trembling in the hangman's grip while they put the noose on, the cap dragged roughly over the ghastly face, the monotonous croak of the parson reading on like a machine, while the poor wretch was being made ready for his doom. It was all horrible to the last degree. Why can't we poison our criminals; let them die comfortably, as Socrates died, of a dose of some strong narcotic. The parson might have some chance—sitting by the dying man's bed, in the quiet of his cell.'

'It would be much nicer,' said Mopsy.

'Where's Miss Bridgeman?' Leonard asked, suddenly, looking round the table, as if only that moment perceiving her absence.

'She is not in her room, Sir. Mary thinks she has gone out,' answered the butler.

'Gone out—after dark. What can have been her motive for going out at such an hour?' asked Leonard of his wife, angrily.

'I have no idea. She may have been sent for by some sick person. You know how good she is.'

'I know what a humbug she is,' retorted Leonard. 'Daniel, go and find out if any messenger came for Miss Bridgeman—or if she left any message for your mistress.'

Daniel went out and came back again in five minutes. No one had seen any messenger—no one had seen Miss Bridgeman go out.

'That's always the case here when I want to ascertain a fact,' growled Leonard: 'no one sees or knows anything. There are twice too many servants for one to be decently served. Well, it doesn't matter much. Miss Bridgeman is old enough to take care of herself—and if she walks off a cliff—it will be her loss and nobody else's.'

'I don't think you ought to speak like that of a person whom your mother loved—and who is my most intimate friend,' said Christabel, with grave reproach.

Leonard had drunk a good deal at dinner; and indeed there had been an inclination on the part of all three men to drown their gloomy ideas in wine, while even Mopsy, who generally took her fair share of champagne, allowed the butler to fill her glass rather oftener than usual—sighing as she sipped the sparkling bright-coloured wine, and remembering, even in the midst of her regret for the newly dead, that she would very soon have returned to a domicile where Moët was not the daily beverage, nay, where, at times, the very beer-barrel ran dry.

After dinner Christabel went to the nursery. It flashed upon her with acutest pain as she entered the room, that when last she had been there she had not known of Angus Hamleigh's death. He had been lying yonder by the waterfall, dead, and she had not known. And now the fact of his death was an old thing—part of the history of her life.

The time when he was alive and with her full of bright thoughts and poetic fancies, seemed ever so long ago. Yet it was only yesterday—yesterday, and gone from her life as utterly as if it were an episode in the records of dead and gone ages—as old as the story of Tristan and Iseult. She sat with her boy till he fell asleep, and sat beside him as he slept, in the dim light of the night-lamp, thinking of him who lay dead in the lonely farmhouse among those green hills they two had loved so well—hushed by the voice of the distant sea, sounding far inland in the silence of night.

She remembered how he had talked last night of the undiscovered country, and how, as he talked, with flushed cheeks, and too brilliant eyes, she had seen the stamp of death on his face. They had talked of 'The Gates Ajar,' a book which they had read together in the days gone by, and which Christabel had often returned to since that time—a book in which the secrets of the future are touched lightly by a daring but a delicate hand—a book which accepts every promise of the Gospel in its most literal sense, and overflows with an exultant belief in just such a Heaven as poor humanity wants. In this author's creed transition from death to life is instant—death is the Lucina of life. There is no long lethargy of the grave, there is no time of darkness. Straight from the bed of death the spirit rushes to the arms of the beloved ones who have gone before. Death, so glorified, becomes only the reunion of love.

He had talked of Socrates, and the faithful few who waited at the prison doors in the early morning, when the sacred ship had returned, and the end was near; and of that farewell discourse in the upper chamber of the house at Jerusalem which seems dimly foreshadowed by the philosopher's converse with his disciples—at Athens, the struggle towards light—at Jerusalem the light itself in fullest glory.

Christabel felt herself bound by no social duty to return to the drawing-room, more especially as Miss Vandeleur had gone upstairs to sit with the afflicted Dopsy—who was bewailing the dead very sincerely in her own fashion, with little bursts of hysterical tears and fragmentary remarks.

'I know he didn't care a straw for me'—she gasped, dabbing her temples with a handkerchief soaked in eau-de-Cologne—'yet it seemed sometimes almost as if he did : he was so attentive—but then he had such lovely manners—no doubt he was just as attentive to all girls. Oh, Mop, if he had cared for me, and if I had married him—what a paradise this earth would have been. Mr. Tregonell told me that he had quite four thousand a year.'

And thus—and thus, with numerous variations on the same theme—poor Dopsy mourned for the dead man ; while the low murmur of the distant sea, beating for ever and for ever against the horned cliffs, and dashing silvery white about the base of that Mechard Rock which looks like a couchant lion keeping guard over the shore, sounded like a funeral chorus in the pauses of her talk.

It was half-past ten when Christabel left her boy's bed-side, and, on her way to her own room, suddenly remembered Jessie's unexplained absence.

She knocked at Miss Bridgeman's door twice, but there was no answer, and then she opened the door and looked in, expecting to find the room empty.

Jessie was sitting in front of the fire in her hat and jacket, staring at the burning coals. There was no light in the room, except the glow and flame of the fire, but even in that cheerful light Jessie looked deadly pale. 'Jessie,' exclaimed Christabel, going up to her and putting a gentle hand upon her shoulder, for she took no notice of the opening of the door, 'where in heaven's name have you been ?'

'Where should I have been ? Surely you can guess ! I have been to see him.'

'To the farm—alone—at night ?'

'Alone—at night—yes ? I would have walked through storm and fire—I would have walked through——' she set her lips like iron, and muttered through her clenched teeth, 'Hell.'

'Jessie, Jessie, how foolish ! What good could it do ?'

'None to him, I know, but perhaps a little to me. I think if I had stayed here I should have gone stark, staring mad. I felt my brain reeling as I sat and thought of him in the twilight, and then it seemed to me as if the only comfort possible was in looking at his dead face—holding his dead hand—and I have done it, and am comforted—a little,' she said, with a laugh, which ended in a convulsive sob.

'My good warm-hearted Jessie !' murmured Christabel, bending over her lovingly, tears raining down her cheeks; 'I know you always liked him.'

'Always liked him!' echoed the other, staring at the fire, in blank tearless grief; 'liked him? yes, always.'

'But you must not take his death so despairingly, dear. You know that, under the fairest circumstances, he had not very long to live. We both knew that.'

'Yes! we knew it. I knew—thought that I had realized the fact—told myself every day that in a few months he would be hidden from us under ground—gone to a life where we cannot follow him even with our thoughts, though we pretend to be so sure about it, as those women do in "The Gates Ajar." I told myself this every day. And yet, now that he is snatched away suddenly—cruelly—mysteriously—it is as hard to bear as if I had believed that he would live a hundred years. I am not like you, a piece of statuesque perfection. I cannot say "Thy will be done," when my dearest—the only man I ever loved upon this wide earth is snatched from me. Does that shock your chilly propriety, you who only half loved him, and who broke his heart at another woman's bidding? Yes! I loved him from the first—loved him all the while he was your lover, and found it enough for happiness to be in his company—to see and hear him, and answer every thought of his with sympathetic thoughts of mine—understanding him quicker and better than you could, bright as you are—happy to go about with you two—to be the shadow in the sunshine of your glad young lives, just as a dog who loved him would have been happy following at his heels. Yes, Belle, I loved him—I think almost from the hour he came here, in the sweet autumn twilight, when I saw that poetic face, half in fire-glow and half in darkness—loved him always, always, always, and admired him as the most perfect among men!'

'Jessie, my dearest, my bravest! And you were so true and loyal. You never by word or look detrayed——'

'What do you think of me?' cried Jessie, indignantly. 'Do you suppose that I would not rather have cut out my tongue—thrown myself off the nearest cliff—than give him one lightest occasion to suspect what a paltry-souled creature I was—so weak that I could not cure myself of loving another woman's lover. While he lived I hated myself for my folly; now he is dead, I glory in the thought of how I loved him—how I gave him the most precious treasures of my soul—my reverence—my regard—my tears and hopes and prayers. Those are the only gold and frankincense and myrrh which the poor of this earth can offer, and I gave them freely to my divinity!'

Christabel laid her hand upon the passionate lips; and kneeling by her friend's side, comforted her with gentle caresses.

'Do you suppose I am not sorry for him, Jessie?' she said reproachfully, after a long pause.

'Yes, no doubt you are, in your way; but it is such an icy way.'

'Would you have me go raving about the house—I, Leonard's wife, Leo's mother? I try to resign myself to God's will: but I shall remember him till the end of my days, with unspeakable sorrow. He was like sunshine in my life; so that life without him seemed all one dull grey, till the baby came, and brought me back to the sunlight, and gave me new duties, new cares!'

'Yes! you can find comfort in a baby's arms—that is a blessing. My comfort was to see my beloved in his bloody shroud—shot through the heart—shot through the heart! Well, the inquest will find out something to-morrow, I hope; but I want you to go with me to-morrow morning, as soon as it is light to the Kieve.'

'What for?'

'To see the spot where he died.'

'What will be the good, Jessie? I know the place too well; it has been in my mind all this evening.'

'There will be some good, perhaps. At any rate, I want you to go with me; and if there ever was any reality in your love, if you are not merely a beautiful piece of mechanism, with a heart that beats by clockwork, you will go.'

'If you wish it I will go.'

'As soon as it is light—say at seven o'clock.'

'I will not go till after breakfast. I want the business of the house to go on just as calmly as if this calamity had never happened. I don't want any one to be able to say, "Mrs. Tregonell is in despair at the loss of her old lover."'

'In fact you want people to suppose that you never cared for him!'

'They cannot suppose that, when I was once so proud of my love. All I want is that no one should think I loved him too well after I was a wife and mother. I will give no occasion for scandal.'

'Didn't I say that you were a handsome automaton?'

'I do not want any one to say hard things of me when I am dead—hard things that my son may hear.'

'When you are dead! You talk as if you thought you were to die soon. You are of the stuff that wears to threescore-and-ten, and even beyond the Psalmist's limit. There is no friction for natures of your calibre. When Werther had shot himself, Charlotte went on cutting bread and butter, don't you know? It was her nature to be proper, and good, and useful, and never to give offence—her nature to cut bread and butter,' concluded Jessie, laughing bitterly.

Christabel stayed with her for an hour, talking to her consoling her, speaking hopefully of that unknown world, so fondly longed for, so piously believed in by the woman who had learnt her creed at Mrs. Tregonell's knees. Many tears were shed by Christabel during that hour of mournful talk; but not one by Jessie Bridgeman. Hers was a dry-eyed grief.

'After breakfast then we will walk to the Kieve,' said Jessie, as Christabel left her. 'Would it be too much to ask you to make it as early as you can?'

'I will go the moment I am free. Good-night, dear.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

DUEL OR MURDER?

ALL the household appeared at breakfast next morning; even poor Dopsy, who felt that she could not nurse her grief in solitude any longer. 'It's behaving too much as if you were his widow,' Mopsy had told her, somewhat harshly; and then there was the task of packing, since they were to leave Mount Royal at eleven, in order to be at Launceston in time for the one o'clock train. This morning's breakfast was less silent than the dinner of yesterday. Everybody felt as if Mr. Hamleigh had been dead at least a week.

Captain Vandeleur and Mr. Montagu discussed the sad event openly, as if the time for reticence were past; speculated and argued as to how the accident could have happened; talked learnedly about guns; wondered whether the country surgeon was equal to the difficulties of the case.

'I can't understand,' said Mr. Montagu, 'if he was found lying in the hollow by the waterfall, how his gun came to go off. If he had been going through a hedge, or among the brushwood on the slope of the hill, it would be easy enough to see how the thing might have happened; but as it is, I'm all in the dark.'

'You had better go and watch the inquest, and make yourself useful to the coroner,' sneered Leonard, who had been drinking his coffee in moody silence until now. 'You seem to think yourself so uncommonly clever and far seeing.'

'Well, I flatter myself I know as much about sport as most men; and I've handled a gun before to-day, and know that the worst gun that was ever made won't go off and shoot a fellow through the heart without provocation of some kind.'

'Who said he was shot through the heart?'

'Somebody did—one of your people, I think.

Mrs. Tregonell sat at the other end of the table, half hidden by the large old-fashioned silver urn, and next her sat Jessie Bridgeman, a spare small figure in a close-fitting black gown, a pale drawn face with a look of burnt-out fires—pale as the crater when the volcanic forces have exhausted themselves. At a look from Christabel she rose, and they two left the room together. Five minutes later they had left the house, and were walking towards the cliff, by following which they could reach the Kieve without going down into Boscastle. It was a wild walk for a windy autumn day; but these two loved its wildness—had walked here in many a happy hour, with souls full of careless glee. Now they walked silently, swiftly, looking neither to the sea nor the land, though both were at their loveliest in the shifting lights and shadows of an exquisite October morning—sunshine enough to make one believe it was summer—breezes enough to blow about the fleecy clouds in the blue, clear sky, to ripple the soft dun-coloured heather on the hillocky common, and to give life and variety to the sea.

It was a long walk; but the length of the way seemed of little account to these two. Christabel had only the sense of a dreary monotony of grief. Time and space had lost their meaning. This dull aching sorrow was to last for ever—till the grave—broken only by brief intervals of gladness and forgetfulness with her boy.

To-day she could hardly keep this one source of consolation in her mind. All her thoughts were centered upon him who lay yonder dead.

'Jessie,' she said, suddenly laying her hand on her companion's wrist, as they crossed the common above the slate-quarry, seaward of Trevalga village, with its little old church and low square tower. 'Jessie, I am not going to see him.'

'What weak stuff you are made of,' muttered Jessie, contemptuously, turning to look into the white frightened face. 'No, you are not going to look upon the dead. You would be afraid, and it might cause scandal. No, you are only going to see the place where he died; and then perhaps you, or I will see a little further into the darkness that hides his fate. You heard how those men were puzzling their dull brains about it at breakfast. Even they can see that there is a mystery.'

'What do you mean?'

'Only as much as I say. I know nothing—yet.'

'But you suspect——?'

'Yes. My mind is full of suspicion; but it is all guess-work—no shred of evidence to go upon.'

They came out of a meadow into the high road presently—the pleasant rustic road which so many happy holiday-making people tread in the sweet summer time—the way to that wild spot where England's first hero was born; the Englishman's Troy, cradle of that fair tradition out of which grew the Englishman's Iliad.

Beside the gate through which they came lay that mighty slab of spar which has been christened King Arthur's Quoit, but which the Rector of Trevalga declared to be the covering stone of a Cromlech. Christabel remembered how facetious they had all been about Arthur and his game of quoits, five years ago, in the bright autumn weather, when the leaves were blown about so lightly in the warm west wind. And now the leaves fell with a mournful heaviness, and every falling leaf seemed an emblem of death.

They went to the door of the farm-house to get the key of the gate which leads to the Kieve. Christabel stood in the little quadrangular garden, looking up at the house, while Jessie rang and asked for what she wanted.

'Did no one except Mr. Hamleigh go to the Kieve yesterday until the men went to look for him?' she asked of the young woman who brought her the key.

'No one else, Miss. No one but him had the key. They found it in the pocket of his shooting jacket when he was brought here.'

Involuntarily, Jessie put the key to her lips. His hand was almost the last that had touched it.

Just as they were leaving the garden, where the last of the yellow dahlias were fading, Christabel took Jessie by the arm, and stopped her.

'In which room is he lying?' she asked. 'Can we see the window from here?'

'Yes, it is that one.'

Jessie pointed to a low, latticed window in the old grey house—a casement round which myrtle and honeysuckle clung lovingly. The lattice stood open. The soft sweet air was blowing into the room, just faintly stirring the white dimity curtain. And *he* was lying there in that last ineffable repose.

They went up the steep lane, between tall tangled hedges, where the ragged robin still showed his pinky blossoms, and many a pale yellow hawksweed enlivened the faded foliage, while the ferns upon the banks, wet from yesterday's rain, still grew rankly green.

On the crest of the hill the breeze grew keener, and the dead leaves were being ripped from the hedgerows, and whirled down, into the hollow, where the autumn wind seemed to follow Christabel and Jessie as they descended, with a long plaintive minor cry, like the lament at an Irish funeral. All was dark and desolate in the green valley, as Jessie unlocked the gate, and they went slowly down the steep slippery path, among moss-grown rock and drooping fern—down and down, by sharply winding ways, so narrow that they could only go one by one, till they came within the sound of the rushing water, and then down into the narrow cleft, where the waterfall tumbles into a broad shallow bed, and dribbles away among green slimy rocks.

Here there is a tiny bridge—a mere plank—that spans the water, with a hand-rail on one side. They crossed this, and stood on the broad flat stone on the other side. This is the very heart of St. Nectan's mystery. Here, high in air, the water pierces the rock, and falls, a slender silvery column, into the rocky bed below.

'Look!' said Jessie Bridgeman, pointing down at the stone.

There were marks of blood upon it—the traces of stains which had been roughly wiped away by the men who found the body.

'This is where he stood,' said Jessie, looking round, and then she ran suddenly across to the narrow path on the other side. 'And some one else stood here—here—just at the end of the bridge. There are marks of other feet here.'

'Those of the men who came to look for him,' said Christabel.'

'Yes; that makes it difficult to tell. There are the traces of many feet. Yet I know,' she muttered, with clenched teeth, 'that some one stood here—just here—and shot him. They were standing face to face. See!'—she stepped the bridge with light swift feet—'so! at ten paces. Don't you see?'

Christabel looked at her with a white scared face, remembering her husband's strange manner the night before last, and those parting words at Mr. Hamleigh's bed-room door. 'You understand my plan?' 'Perfectly.' 'It saves all trouble, don't you see.' Those few words had impressed themselves upon her memory —insignificant as they were—because of something in the tone in which they were spoken—something in the manner of the two men.

'You mean,' she said slowly, with her hand clenching the rail of the bridge, seeking unconsciously for support; 'you mean that Angus and my husband met here by appointment, and fought a duel?'

'That is my reading of the mystery.'

'Here in this lonely place—without witnesses—my husband murdered him!'

'They would not count it murder. Fate might have been the other way. Your husband might have been killed.'

'No!' cried Christabel, passionately; 'Angus would not have killed him. That would have been too deep a dishonour!'

She stood silent for a few moments, white as death, looking round her with wide, despairing eyes.

'He has been murdered!' she said, in hoarse, faint tones. 'That suspicion has been in my mind dark—shapeless—horrible —from the first. He has been murdered! And I am to spend the rest of my life with his murderer!' Then, with a sudden hysterical cry, she turned angrily upon Jessie.

'How dare you tell lies about my husband?' she exclaimed. Don't you know that nobody came here yesterday except Angus; no one else had the key. The girl at the farm told us so.'

'The key!' echoed Jessie, contemptuously. 'Do you think a gate, breast high, would keep out an athlete like your husband? Besides, there is another way of getting here, without going near the gate, where he might be seen, perhaps, by some farm labourer in the field. The men were ploughing there yesterday, and heard a shot. They told me that last night at the farm. Wait! wait!' cried Jessie, excitedly.

She rushed away, light as a lapwing, flying across the narrow bridge bounding from stone to stone—vanishing amidst dark autumn foliage. Christabel heard her steps dying away in the distance. Then there was an interval of some minutes, during which Christabel, hardly caring to wonder what had become of her companion, stood clinging to the handrail, and staring down at stones and shingle, feathery ferns, soddened logs, logs, the water rippling and lapping round all things, crystal clear.

Then startled by a voice above her head, she looked up and saw Jessie's light figure just as she dropped herself over the sharp arch of rock, and scrambled through the cleft, hanging on by her hands, finding a foothold in the most perilous places—in danger of instant death.

'My God!' murmured Christabel, with clasped hands, not daring to cry aloud lest she should increase Jessie's peril. 'She will be killed.'

With a nervous grip, and a muscular strength which no one could have supposed possible in so slender a frame, Jessie Bridgeman made good her descent, and stood on the shelf of slippery rock, below the waterfall, unhurt save for a good many scratches and cuts upon the hands that had clung so fiercely to root and bramble, crag and boulder.

'What I could do your husband could do,' she said. 'He did it often when he was a boy—you must remember his boasting of it. He did it yesterday. Look at this.'

'This' was a ragged narrow shread of heather cloth, with a brick-dust red tinge in its dark warp, which Leonard had much affected this year—'Mr. Tregonell's colour, is it not?' asked Jessie.

'Yes—it is like his coat.'

'Like? It is a part of his coat. I found it hanging on a bramble, at the top of the cleft. Try if you can find the coat when you get home, and see if it is not torn. But most likely he will have hidden the clothes he wore yesterday. Murderers generally do.'

'How dare you call him a murderer?' said Christabel, trembling, and cold to the heart. It seemed to her as if the mild autumnal air—here in this sheltered nook which was always warmer than the rest of the world—had suddenly become an icy blast that blew straight from far away arctic seas. 'How dare you call my husband a murderer?'

'Oh, I forgot. It was a duel I suppose: a fair fight, planned so skilfully that the result should seem like an accident, and the survivor should run no risk. Still to my mind, it was murder all the same—for I know who provoked the quarrel—yes—and you know—you, who are his wife—and who for respectability's sake, will try to shield him—you know—for you must have seen hatred and murder in his face that night when he came into the drawing-room—and asked Mr. Hamleigh for a few words in private. It was then he planned this work,' pointing to the broad level stone against which the clear water was rippling with such a pretty playful sound, while those two women stood looking at each other with pale intent faces, fixed eyes, and tremulous lips; 'and Angus Hamleigh, who valued his brief remnant of earthly life so lightly, consented—reluctantly perhaps—but too proud to refuse. And he fired in the air—yes, I know he would not have injured your husband by so much as a hair of his head—I know him well enough to be sure of that. He came here like a victim to the altar. Leonard Tregonell must have known that. And I say that though he, with his Mexican freebooter's morality, may have called it a fair fight, it was murder, deliberate, diabolical murder.'

'If this is true,' said Christabel in a low voice, 'I will have no mercy upon him.'

'Oh, yes, you will. You will sacrifice feeling to propriety, you will put a good face upon things, for the sake of your son. You were born and swaddled in the purple of respectability. You will not stir a finger to avenge the dead.'

'I will have no mercy upon him,' repeated Christabel, with a strange look in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXV.

'DUST TO DUST.'

The inquest at the Wharncliffe Arms was conducted in a thoroughly respectable, unsuspicious manner. No searching questions were asked, no inferences drawn. To the farmers and tradespeople who constituted that rustic jury, the case seemed too simple to need any severe interrogation. A gentleman staying in a country house goes out shooting, and is so unlucky as to shoot himself instead of the birds whereof he went in search. He is found with an empty bag, and a charge of swan-shot through his heart.

'Hard lines,' as Jack Vandeleur observed, *sotto voce*, to a neighbouring squire, while the inquest was pursuing its sleepy course, 'and about the queerest fluke I ever saw on any table.'

'Was it a fluke?' muttered little Montagu, lifting himself on tiptoe to watch the proceedings. He and his companions were standing among a little crowd at the door of the justice-room. 'It looks to me uncommonly as if Mr. Hamleigh had shot himself. We all know he was deadly sweet on Mrs. T., although both of them behaved beautifully.'

'Men have died—and worms have eaten them—but not for love,' quoted Captain Vandeleur, who had a hearsay knowledge of Shakespeare, though he had never read a Shakespearian play in his life. 'If Hamleigh was so dead tired of life that he wanted to kill himself he could have done it comfortably in his own room.'

'He might wish to avoid the imputation of suicide.'

'Pshaw, how can any man care what comes afterwards? Bury me where four roads meet, with a stake through my body, or in Westminster Abbey under a marble monument, and the result is just the same to me.'

'That's because you are an out-and-out Bohemian. But Hamleigh was a dandy in all things. He would be nice about the details of his death.'

Mr. Hamleigh's valet was now being questioned as to his master's conduct and manner on the morning he left Mount Royal. The man replied that his master's manner had been exactly the same as usual. He was always very quiet—said no more than was necessary to be said. He was a kind master but never familiar. 'He never made a companion of me,' said the man, 'though I'd been with him at home and abroad twelve years; but a better master never lived. He was always an early riser—there was nothing out of the way in his getting up at six, and going out at seven. There was only one thing at all out of the common, and that was his attending to his gun himself, instead of telling me to get it ready for him.'

'Had he many guns with him?'

'Only two. The one he took was an old gun—a favourite.'

'Do you know why he took swan-shot to shoot woodcocks?'

'No—unless he made a mistake in the charge. He took the cartridges out of the case himself, and put them into his pocket. He was an experienced sportsman, though he was never as fond of sport as the generality of gentlemen.'

'Do you know if he had been troubled in mind of late?'

'No; I don't think he had any trouble on his mind. He was in very bad health, and knew that he had not long to live; but he seemed quite happy and contented. Indeed, judging by what I saw of him, I should say that he was in a more easy, contented frame of mind during the last few months than he had ever been for the last four years.'

This closed the examination. There had been very few witnesses called—only the medical man, the men who had found the body, the girl at the farm, who declared that she had given the key to Mr. Hamleigh a little before eight that morning, that no one else had asked for the key till the men came from Mount Royal—that to her knowledge, no one but the men at work on the farm had gone up the lane that morning. A couple of farm labourers gave the same testimony—they had been at work in the topmost field all the morning, and no one had gone to the Kieve that way except the gentleman that was killed. They had heard a shot—or two shots—they were not certain which, fired between eight and nine. They were not very clear as to the hour, and they could not say for certain whether they heard one or two shots; but they knew that the report was a very loud one—unusually loud for a sportsman's shot.

Mr. Tregonell, although he was in the room ready to answer any questions, was not interrogated. The jury went in a wagonette to see the body, which was still lying at the farm, and returned after a brief inspection of that peaceful clay—the countenance wearing that beautiful calm which is said to be characteristic of death from a gun-shot wound—to give their erdict.

'Death by misadventure.'

The body was carried to Mount Royal after dark, and three days later there was a stately funeral, to which first cousins and second cousins of the dead came as from the four corners of the earth; for Angus Hamleigh, dying a bachelor, and leaving a handsome estate behind him, was a person to be treated with all those last honours which affectionate kindred can offer to poor humanity.

He was buried in the little churchyard in the hollow, where Christabel and he had heard the robin singing and the dull thud of the earth thrown out of an open grave in the calm autumn sunlight. Now in the autumn his own grave was dug in the same peaceful spot—in accordance with a note which his valet, who knew his habits, found in a diary.

'Oct. 11.—If I should die in Cornwall—and there are times when I feel as if death were nearer than my doctor told me at our last interview—I should like to be buried in Minster Churchyard. I have outlived all family associations, and I should like to lie in a spot which is dear to me for its own sake.'

A will had been found in Mr. Hamleigh's despatch box, which receptacle was opened by his lawyer, who came from London on purpose to take charge of any papers which his client might have in his possession at the time of his death. The bulk of his papers were no doubt in his chambers in the Albany; chambers which he had taken on coming of age; and which he had occupied at intervals ever since.

Mr. Tregonell showed himself keenly anxious that everything should be done in a strictly legal manner, and it was by his own hand that the lawyer was informed of his client's death, and invited to Mount Royal. Mr. Bryanstone, the solicitor, a thorough man of the world, and an altogether agreeable person, appeared at the Manor House two days before the funeral, and, being empowered by Mr. Tregonell to act as he pleased, sent telegrams far and wide to the dead man's kindred, who came trooping like carrion crows to the funeral feast.

Angus Hamleigh was buried in the afternoon; a mild, peaceful afternoon at the end of October, with a yellow light in the western sky, which deepened and brightened as the funeral train wound across the valley, climbed the steep street of Boscastle, and then wound slowly downwards into the green heart of the hill, to the little rustic burial place. That orb of molten gold was sinking behind the edge of the moor just when the Vicar read the last words of the funeral service. Golden and crimson gleams touched the landscape here and there, golden lights still lingered on the sea, as the mourners, so thoroughly formal and conventional for the most part—Jack Vandeleur and little Monty amidst the train with carefully-composed features—went back to their carriages. And then the shades of evening came slowly down, and spread a dark pall over hill-side, and hedgerow, and churchyard, where there was no sound but the monotonous fall of the earth, which the grave-digger was shovelling into that new grave.

There had been no women at the funeral. Those two who each after her own peculiar fashion, had loved the dead man, were shut in their own rooms, thinking of him, picturing, with too vivid imagery, the lowering of the coffin in the new-made grave—hearing the solemn monotony of the clergyman's voice, sounding clear in the clear air—the first shovelful of heart on the coffin-lid—dust to dust; dust to dust.

Lamps were lighted in the drawing-room, where the will was to be read. A large wood fire burned brightly—pleasant after the lowered atmosphere of evening. Wines and other refreshments stood on a table near the hearth; another table stood ready for the lawyer. So far as there could be, or ought to be, comfort and cheeriness on so sad an occasion, comfort and cheeriness were here. The cousins—first and second—warmed themselves before the fire, and discoursed in low murmurs of the time and the trouble it had cost them to reach this out-of-the-way hole, and discussed the means of getting away from it. Mr. Tregonell stood on one side of the hearth, leaning his broad back heavily against the sculptured chimney-piece, and listening moodily to Captain Vandeleur's muttered discourse. He had insisted upon keeping his henchman with him during this gloomy period; sending an old servant as far as Plymouth to see the Miss Vandeleurs into the London train, rather than part with his familiar friend. Even Mr. Montagu, who had delicately hinted at departure, was roughly bidden to remain.

'I shall be going away myself in a week or so,' said Mr. Tregonell. 'I don't mean to spend the winter at this fag-end of creation. It will be time enough for you to go when I go.'

The friends, enjoying free quarters which were excellent in their way, and having no better berths in view, freely forgave the bluntness of the invitation, and stayed. But they commented between themselves in the seclusion of the smoking room upon the Squire's disinclination to be left without cheerful company.

'He's infernally nervous, that's what it all means,' said little Monty, who had all that cock-sparrowish pluck which small men are wont to possess—the calm security of insignificance. 'You wouldn't suppose a great burly fellow like Tregonell, who has travelled all over the world, would be scared by a death in his house, would you?'

'Death is awful, let it come when it will,' answered Jack Vandeleur, dubiously. 'I've seen plenty of hard-hitting in the hill-country, but I'd go a long way to avoid seeing a strange dog die, let alone a dog I was fond of.'

'Tregonell couldn't have been very fond of Hamleigh, that's certain,' said Monty.

'They seemed good friends.'

'Seemed; yes. But do you suppose Tregonell ever forgot that Mr. Hamleigh and his wife had once been engaged to be married? It isn't in human nature to forget that kind of thing, and he made believe that he asked Hamleigh here to give one of your sisters a chance of getting a rich husband,' said Monty, rolling up a cigarette, as he sat adroitly balanced on the arm of a large chair, and shaking his head gently, with lowered eyelids, and a cynical smile curling his thin lips. 'That was a little too thin. He asked Hamleigh here because he was savagely jealous, and suspected his motive for turning up in this part of the country, and wanted to see how he and Mrs. Tregonell would carry on.'

'Whatever he wanted, I'm sure he saw no harm in either of them,' said Captain Vandeleur. 'I'm as quick as any man at twigging that kind of thing, and I'll swear that it was all fair and above board with those two; they behaved beautifully.

'So they did, poor things,' answered Monty, in his little purring way. 'And yet Tregonell wasn't happy.'

'He'd have been better pleased if Hamleigh had proposed to my sister, as he ought to have done,' said Vandeleur, trying to look indignant at the memory of Dopsy's wrongs.

'Now drop that, old Van,' said Monty, laughing softly and pleasantly, as he lit his cigarette, and began to smoke, dreamily, daintily, like a man to whom smoking is a fine art. 'Sink your sister. As I said before, that's too thin. Dopsy is a dear little girl—one of the five or six and twenty nice girls whom I passionately adore; but she was never anywhere within range of Hamleigh. First and foremost she isn't his style, and secondly he has never got over the loss of Mrs. Tregonell. He behaved beautifully while he was here; but he was just as much in love with her as he was four years ago, when I used to meet them at dances—a regular pair of Arcadian lovers; Daphne and Chloe, and that kind of thing. She only wanted a crook to make the picture perfect.'

And now Mr. Bryanstone had hummed and hawed a little, and had put on a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, and cousins near and distant ceased their conversational undertones, and seated themselves conveniently to listen.

The will was brief. 'To Percy Ritherdon, Commander in Her Majesty's Navy, my first cousin and old schoolfellow, in memory of his dear mother's kindness to one who had no mother, I bequeath ten thousand pounds, and my sapphire ring, which has been an heirloom, and which I hope he will leave to any son of his whom he may call after me.

'To my servant, John Danby, five hundred pounds in consols.

'To my housekeeper in the Albany, two hundred and fifty.

'To James Bryanstone, my very kind friend and solicitor of Lincoln's Inn, my collection of gold and silver snuff-boxes, and Roman intaglios.

'All the rest of my estate, real and personal, to be vested in trustees, of whom the above-mentioned James Bryanstone shall be one, and the Rev. John Carlyon, of Trevena, Cornwall, the other, for the sole use and benefit of Leonard George Tregonell, now an infant, who shall, with his father and mother's consent, assume the name of Hamleigh after that of Tregonell upon coming of age, and I hope that his father and mother will accept this legacy for their son in the spirit of pure friendship for them, and attachment to the boy by which it is dictated, and that they will suffer their son so to perpetuate the name of one who will die childless.'

There was an awful silence—perfect collapse on the part of the cousins, the one kinsman selected for benefaction being now with his ship in the Mediterranean.

And then Leonard Tregonell rose from his seat by the fire, and came close up to the table at which Mr. Bryanstone was sitting.

'Am I at liberty to reject that legacy on my son's part?' he asked.

'Certainly not. The money is left in trust. Your son can do what he likes when he comes of age. But why should you wish to decline such a legacy—left in such friendly terms? Mr. Hamleigh was your friend.'

'He was my mother's friend—for me only a recent acquaintance. It seems to me that there is a sort of indirect insult in such a bequest, as if I were unable to provide for my boy—as if I were likely to run through everything, and make him a pauper before he comes of age.'

'Believe me there is no such implication,' said the lawyer, smiling blandly at the look of trouble and anger in the other man's face. 'Did you never hear before of money being left to a man who already has plenty? That is the general bent of all legacies. In this world it is the poor who are sent empty away,' murmured Mr. Bryanstone, with a sly glance under his spectacles at the seven blank faces of the seven cousins. 'I consider that Mr. Hamleigh—who was my very dear friend—has paid you the highest compliment in his power, and that you have every reason to honour his memory.'

'And legally I have no power to refuse his property?'

'Certainly not. The estate is not left to you—you have no power to touch a sixpence of it.'

'And the will is dated?'

'Just three weeks ago.'

'Within the first week of this visit here. He must have taken an inordinate fancy to my boy.'

Mr. Bryanstone smiled to himself softly with lowered eyelids, as he folded up the will—a holograph will upon a single sheet of Bath post—witnessed by two of the Mount Royal servants. The family solicitor knew all about Angus Hamleigh's engagement to Miss Courtenay—had even received instructions for drawing the marriage settlement—but he was too much a man of the world to refer to that fact.

'Was not Mr. Hamleigh's father engaged to your mother?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Then don't you think that respect for your mother may have had some influence with Mr. Hamleigh when he made your son his heir?'

'I am not going to speculate about his motives. I only wish he had left his money to an asylum for idiots—or to his cousins'—with a glance at the somewhat vacuous countenances of the dead man's kindred, 'or that I were at liberty to decline his gift—which I should do, flatly.'

'This sounds as if you were prejudiced against my lamented friend. I thought you liked him.'

'So I did,' stammered Leonard, 'but not well enough to give him the right to patronise me with his d—d legacy.'

'Mr. Tregonell,' said the lawyer, frowning, 'I have to remind you that my late client has left you, individually, nothing—and I must and that your language and manner are most unbefiting this melancholy occasion.'

Leonard grumbled an inaudible reply, and walked back to the fire-place. The whole of this conversation had been carried on in undertones—so that the cousins who had gathered in a group upon the hearth-rug, and who were for the most part absorbed in pensive reflections upon the futility of earthly hopes, heard very little of it. They belonged to that species of well-dressed nonentities, more or less impecunious, which sometimes constitute the outer fringe upon a good old family. To each of them it seemed a hard thing that Angus Hamleigh had not remembered him individually, choosing him out of the ruck of cousinship as a meet object for bounty.

'He ought to have left me an odd thousand,' murmured a beardless subaltern; 'he knew how badly I wanted it, for I borrowed a pony of him the last time he asked me to breakfast; and a man of good family must be very hard up when he comes to borrowing ponies.'

'I dare say you would not have demurred to making it a monkey, if Mr. Hamleigh had proposed it,' said his interlocutor.

'Of course not: and if he had been generous he would have given me something handsome, instead of being so confoundedly literal as to write his check for exactly the amount I asked for. A man of his means and age ought to have had more feeling for a young fellow in his first season. And now I am out of pocket for my expenses to this infernal hole.'

Thus, and with other wailings of an approximate character, did Angus Hamleigh's kindred make their lamentation: and then they all began to arrange amoung themselves for getting away as early as possible next morning—and for travelling together, with a distant idea of a little 'Nap' to beguile the weariness of the way between Plymouth and Paddington. There was room enough for them all at Mount Royal, and Mr. Tregonell was not a man to permit any guests, however assembled, to leave his house for the shelter of an inn; so the cousins stayed, dined heavily, smoked as furiously as those furnace chimneys which are supposed not to smoke, all the evening, and thought they were passing virtuous for refraining from the relaxation of pool, or shell-out—opining that the click of the balls might have an unholy sound so soon after a funeral. Debarred from this amusement, they discussed the career and character of the dead man, and were all agreed, in the friendliest spirit, that there had been very little in him, and that he had made a poor thing of his life, and obtained a most inadequate amount of pleasure out of his money.

Mount Royal was clear of them all by eleven o'clock next morning. Mr. Montagu went away with them, and only Captain Vandeleur remained to bear Leonard company in a house which now seemed given over to gloom. Christabel kept her room, with Jessie Bridgeman in constant attendance upon her. She had not seen her husband since her return from the Kieve, and Jessie had told him in a few resolute words that it would not be well for them to meet.

'She is very ill,' said Jessie, standing on the threshold of the room, while Leonard remained in the corridor outside. 'Dr. Hayle has seen her, and he says that she must have perfect quiet—no one is to worry her—no one is to talk to her—the shock she has suffered in this dreadful business has shattered her nerves.'

'Why can't you say in plain words that she is grieving for the only man she ever loved,' asked Leonard.

'I am not going to say that which is not true; and which you better than any one else, know is not true. It is not Angus Hamleigh's death, but the manner of his death, which she feels. Take that to your heart, Mr. Tregonell.'

'You are a viper!' said Leonard, 'and you always were a viper. Tell my wife—when she is well enough to hear reason—that I am not going to be sat upon by her, or her toady; and that as she is going to spend her winter dissolved in tears for Mr. Hamleigh's death, I shall spend mine in South America, with Jack Vandeleur.'

Three days later his arrangements were all made for leaving Cornwall. Captain Vandeleur was very glad to go with him, upon what he, Jack, pleasantly called 'reciprocal terms,' Mr. Tregonell paying all expenses as a set-off against his friend's cheerful society. There was no false pride about Poker Vandeleur; no narrow-minded dislike to being paid for. He was so thoroughly assured as to the perfect equitableness of the transaction.

On the morning he left Mount Royal, Mr. Tregonell went into the nursery to bid his son good-bye. He contrived, by some mild artifice, to send the nurse on an errand; and while she was away, strained the child to his breast, and hugged and kissed him with a rough fervour which he had never before shown. The boy quavered a little, and his lip drooped under that rough caress—and then the clear blue eyes looked up and saw that this vehemence meant love, and the chubby arms clung closely round the father's neck.

'Poor little beggar!' muttered Leonard, his eyes clouded with tears. 'I wonder whether I shall ever see him again. He might die—or I—there is no telling. Hard lines to leave him for six months on end—but'—with a suppressed shudder—'I should go mad if I stayed here.'

The nurse came back, and Leonard put the child on his rocking-horse, which he had left reluctantly at the father's entrance, and left the nursery without another word. In the corridor he lingered for some minutes—now staring absently at the family portraits—now looking at the door of his wife's room. He had been occupying a bachelor room at the other end of the house since her illness.

Should he force an entrance to that closed chamber—defy Jessie Bridgeman, and take leave of his wife?—the wife whom, after the bent of his own nature, he had passionately loved. What could he say to her? Very little, in his present mood. What would she say to him? There was the rub. From that pale face—from those uplifted eyes—almost as innocent as the eyes that had looked at him just now—he shrank in absolute fear.

At the last moment, after he had put on his overcoat, and when the dogcart stood waiting for him at the door, he sat down and scribbled a few hasty lines of farewell.

'I am told you are too ill to see me, but cannot go without one word of good-bye. If I thought you cared a rap for me, I should stay; but I believe you have set yourself against me because of this man's death, and that you will get well all the sooner for my being far away. Perhaps six months hence, when I come back again—if I don't get killed out yonder, which is always on the cards—you may have learnt to feel more kindly towards me. God knows I have loved you as well as ever man loved woman—too well for my own happiness. Good-bye. Take care of the boy; and don't let that little viper, Jessie Bridgeman, poison your mind against me.'

'Leonard! are you coming to-day or to-morrow?' cried Jack Vandeleur's stentorian voice from the hall. 'We shall lose the train at Launceston, if you don't look sharp.'

Thus summoned, Leonard thrust his letter into an envelope, directed it to his wife, and gave it to Daniel, who was hovering about to do due honour to his master's departure—the master for whose infantine sports he had made his middle-aged back as the back of a horse, and perambulated the passages on all-fours, twenty years ago—the master who seemed but too likely to bring his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave, judging by the pace at which he now appeared to be travelling along the road to ruin.

CHAPTER XXVI.

'PAIN FOR THY GIRDLE, AND SORROW UPON THY HEAD.'

Now came a period of gloom and solitude at Mount Royal. Mrs. Tregonell lived secluded in her own rooms, rarely leaving them save to visit her boy in his nursery, or to go for long lonely rambles with Miss Bridgeman. The lower part of the house was given over to silence and emptiness. It was winter, and the roads were not inviting for visitors; so, after a few calls had been made by neighbours who lived within ten miles or so, and those callers had been politely informed by Daniel that his mistress was confined to her room by a severe cough, and was not well enough to see any one, no more carriages drove up the long avenue, and the lodge-keeper's place became a sinecure, save for opening the gate in the morning, and shutting it at dusk.

Mrs. Tregonell neither rode nor drove, and the horses were only taken out of their stables to be exercised by grooms and underlings. The servants fell into the way of living their own lives, almost as if they had been on board wages in the absence of the family. The good old doctor, who had attended Christabel in all her childish illnesses, came twice a week, and stayed an hour or so in the morning-room upstairs, closeted with his patient and her companion, and then looked at little Leo in his nursery, that young creature growing and thriving exceedingly amidst the gloom and silence of the house, and awakening the echoes occasionally with bursts of baby mirth.

None of the servants knew exactly what was amiss with Mrs. Tregonell. Jessie guarded and fenced her in with such jealous care, hardly letting any other member of the household spend five minutes in her company. They only knew that she was very white, very sad-looking; that it was with the utmost difficulty she was persuaded to take sufficient nourishment to sustain life; and that her only recreation consisted in those long walks with Jessie—walks which they took in all weathers, and sometimes at the strangest hours. The people about Boscastle grew accustomed to the sight of those two solitary women, clad in dark cloth ulsters, with close-fitting felt hats, that defied wind and weather, armed with sturdy umbrellas, tramping over fields and commons, by hilly paths, through the winding valley where the stream ran loud and deep after the autumn rains, on the cliffs above the wild grey sea—always avoiding as much as possible all beaten tracks, and the haunts of mankind. Those who did meet the two reported that there was something strange in the looks and ways of both. They did not talk to each other as most ladies talked, to beguile the way: they marched on in silence—the younger, fairer face pale as death and inexpressibly sad, and with a look as of one who walks in her sleep, with wide-open, unseeing eyes.

'She looks just like a person who might walk over the cliff, if there was no one by to take care of her,' said Mrs. Penny, the butcher's wife, who had met them one day on her way home from Camelford Market; 'but Miss Bridgeman, she do take such care, and she do watch every step of young Mrs. Tregonell's'—Christabel was always spoken of as young Mrs. Tregonell by those people who had known her aunt. 'I'm afraid the poor dear lady has gone a little wrong in her head since Mr Hamleigh shot himself; and there are some as do think he shot himself for her sake, never having got over her marrying our Squire.'

On many a winter evening, when the sea ran high and wild at the foot of the rocky promontory, and overhead a wilder sky seemed like another tempestuous sea inverted, those two women paced the grass-grown hill at Tintagel, above the nameless graves, among the ruins of prehistorical splendour.

They were not always silent, as they walked slowly to and fro among the rank grass, or stood looking at those wild waves which came rolling in like solid walls of shining black water, to burst into ruin with a thunderous roar against the everlasting rocks They talked long and earnestly in this solitude, and in other solitary spots along that wild and varied coast; but none but themselves ever knew what they talked about, or what was the delight and relief which they found in the dark grandeur of that winter sky and sea. And so the months crept by, in a dreary monotony, and it was spring once more; all the orchards full of bloom—those lovely little orchards of Alpine Boscastle, here nestling in the deep gorge, there hanging on the edge of the hill. The gardens were golden with daffodils, tulips, narcissus, jonquil—that rich variety of yellow blossoms which come in early spring, like a floral sunrise—and the waves ran gently into the narrow inlet between the tall cliffs. But those two lonely women were no longer seen roaming over the hills, or sitting down to rest in some sheltered corner of Pentargon Bay. They had gone to Switzerland, taking the nurse and baby with them, and were not expected to return to Mount Royal till the autumn.

Mr. Tregonell's South American wanderings had lasted longer than he had originally contemplated. His latest letters—brief scrawls, written at rough resting-places—announced a considerable extension of his travels. He and his friend were following in the footsteps of Mr. Whymper, on the Equatorial Andes, the backbone of South America. Dopsy and Mopsy were moping in the dusty South Belgravian lodging-house, nursing their invalid father, squabbling with their landlady, cutting, contriving, straining every nerve to make sixpences go as far as shillings, and only getting outside glimpses of the world of pleasure and gaiety, art and fashion, in their weary trampings up and down the dusty pathways of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens.

They had written three or four times to Mrs. Tregonell, letters running over with affection, fondly hoping for an invitation to Mount Royal; but the answers had been in Jessie Bridgeman's hand, and the last had come from Zurich, which seemed altogether hopeless. They had sent Christmas cards and New Year's cards, and had made every effort, compatible with their limited means, to maintain the links of friendship.

'I wish we could afford to send her a New Year's gift, or a toy for that baby,' said Mopsy, who was not fond of infants. 'But what could we send her that she would care for, when she has everything in this world that is worth having. And we could not get a toy, which that pampered child would think worth looking at, under a sovereign,' concluded Mop, with a profound sigh.

And so the year wore on, dry, and dreary, and dusty for the two girls, whose only friends were the chosen few whom their brother made known to them—friends who naturally dropped out of their horizon in Captain Vandeleur's absence.

'What a miserable summer it has been,' said Dopsy, yawning and stretching in her tawdry morning gown—one of last year's high-art tea gowns—and surveying with despondent eye the barren breakfast-table, where two London eggs, and the remains of yesterday's loaf, flanked by a nearly empty marmalade pot, comprised all the temptations of the flesh. 'What a wretched summer—hot, and sultry, and thundery, and dusty—the cholera raging in Chelsea, and measles only divided from us by Lambeth Bridge! And we have not been to a single theatre.'

'Or tasted a single French dinner.'

'Or been given a single pair of gloves.'

'Hark!' cried Mopsy, 'it's the postman,' and she rushed into the passage, too eager to await the maid-of-all-work's slipshod foot.

'What's the good of exciting oneself?' murmured Dopsy, with another stretch of long thin arms above a towzled head. 'Of course it's only a bill, or a lawyer's letter for pa.'

Happily it was neither of these unpleasantnesses which the morning messenger had brought, but a large vellum envelope, with the address, Mount Royal, in Old English letters above the small neat seal; and the hand which had directed the envelope was Christabel Tregonell's.

'At last she has condescended to write to me with her own hand,' said Dopsy, to whom, as Miss Vandeleur, the letter was addressed. 'But I dare say it's only a humbugging note. I know she didn't really like us: we are not her style.'

'How should we be?' exclaimed Mopsy, whom the languid influences of a sultry August had made ill-humoured and cynical. '*She* was not brought up in the gutter.'

'Mopsy,' cried her sister, with a gasp of surprise and delight, 'it's an invitation!'

'WHAT?'

'Listen—

'"DEAR MISS VANDELEUR,—

'"We have just received a telegram from Buenos Ayres. Mr. Tregonell and Captain Vandeleur leave that port for Plymouth this afternoon, and will come straight from Plymouth here. I think you would both wish to meet your brother on his arrival; and I know Mr. Tregonell is likely to want to keep him here for some time. Will you, therefore, come to us early next week, so as to be here to welcome the travellers?

'"Very sincerely yours,

'"CHRISTABEL TREGONELL."'

'This is too delicious,' exclaimed Dopsy. 'But however are we to find the money for the journey? And our clothes—what a lot we shall have to do to our clothes. If we only had credit at a good draper's.'

'Suppose we were to try our landlady's plan, for once in a way,' suggested Mopsy, faintly, 'and get a few things from that man near Drury Lane who takes weekly instalments.'

'What, the Tallyman?' screamed Dopsy. 'No, I would rather be dressed like a South Sea Islander. It's not only the utter lowness of the thing; but the man's goods are never like anybody else's. The colours and materials seem invented on purpose for him.'

'That might pass for high art.'

'Well, they're ugly enough even for that; but it's not the right kind of ugliness.'

'After all,' answered Mopsy, 'we have no more chance of paying weekly than we have of paying monthly or quarterly. Nothing under three years' credit would be any use to *us*. Something might happen—Fortune's wheel might turn in three years.'

'Whenever it does turn it will be the wrong way, and we shall be under it,' said Dopsy, still giving over to gloom.

It was very delightful to be invited to a fine old country house; but it was bitter to know that one must go there but half provided with those things which civilization have made a necessity.

'How happy those South Sea Islanders must be,' sighed

Mopsy, pensively meditating upon the difference between wearing nothing, and having nothing to wear.

CHAPTER XXVII.

'I WILL HAVE NO MERCY ON HIM.'

THE Buenos Ayres steamer was within sight of land—English land. Those shining lights yonder were the twin lanterns of the Lizard. Leonard and his friend paced the bridge smoking their cigars, and looking towards that double star which shone out as one light in the distance, and thinking that they were going back to civilization—conventional habits—a world which must seem cramped and narrow—not much better than the squirrel's cage seems to the squirrel—after the vast width and margin of that wilder, freer world they had just left—where men and women were not much more civilized than the unbroken horses that were brought out struggling, and roped in among a team of older stagers, to be dragged along anyhow for the first mile or so, rebellious, and wondering, and to fall in with the necessities of the case somehow before the stage was done.

There was no thrill of patriotic rapture in the breast of either traveller as he watched yonder well-known light brightening on the dark horizon. Leonard had left his country too often to feel any deep emotion at returning to it. He had none of those strong feelings which mark a man as the son of the soil, and make it seem to him that he belongs to one spot of earth, and can neither live nor die happily anywhere else. The entire globe was his country, a world created for him to roam about in. climbing all its hills, shooting in all its forests, fishing in all its rivers, exhausting all the sport and amusement that was to be had out of it—and with no anchor to chain him down to any given spot. Yet, though he had none of the deep feeling of the exile returning to the country of his birth, he was not without emotion as he saw the Lizard light broadening and yellowing under the pale beams of a young moon. He was thinking of his wife—the wife whose face he had not seen since that gloomy morning at Mount Royal, when she sat pale and calm in her place at the head of his table—maintaining her dignity as the mistress of his house, albeit he knew her heart was breaking. From the hour of her return from the Kieve, they had been parted. She had kept her room, guarded by Jessie; and he had been told, significantly, that it was not well they should meet.

How would she receive him now? What were her thoughts and feelings about that dead man? The man whom she had loved and he had hated: not only because his wife loved him—though that reason was strong enough for hatred—but because the man was in every attribute so much his own superior. Never had Leonard Tregonell felt such keen anxiety as he felt now, when he speculated upon his wife's greeting—when he tried to imagine how they two would feel and act standing face to face after nearly a year of severance.

The correspondence between them had been of the slightest. For the first six months his only home-letters had been from Miss Bridgeman—curt, business-like communications—telling him of his boy's health and general progress, and of any details about the estate which it was his place to be told. Of Christabel she wrote as briefly as possible. 'Mrs. Tregonell is a little better.' 'Mrs. Tregonell is gradually regaining strength.' 'The doctor considers Mrs. Tregonell much improved,' and so on.

Later there had been letters from Christabel—letters written in Switzerland—in which the writer confined herself almost entirely to news of the boy's growth and improvement, and to the particulars of their movements from one place to another—letters which gave not the faintest indication of the writer's frame of mind: as devoid of sentiment as an official communication from one legation to another.

He was going back to Mount Royal therefore in profound ignorance of his wife's feelings—whether he would be received with smiles or frowns, with tears or sullen gloom. Albeit not of a sensitive nature, this uncertainty made him uncomfortable, and he looked at yonder faint grey shore—the peaks and pinnacles of that wild western coast—without any of those blissful emotions which the returning wanderer always experiences—in poetry.

Plymouth, however, where they went ashore next morning, seemed a very enjoyable place after the cities of South America. It was not so picturesque a town, nor had it that rowdy air and dissipated flavour which Mr. Tregonell appreciated in the cities of the South: but it had a teeming life and perpetual movement, which were unknown on the shores of the Pacific; the press and hurry of many industries—the steady fervour of a town where wealth is made by honest labour—the intensity of a place which is in somewise the cradle of naval warfare. Mr. Tregonell breakfasted and lunched at the Duke of Cornwall, strolled on the Hoe, played two or three games on the first English billiard-table he had seen for a year, and found a novel delight in winners and losers.

An afternoon train took the travellers on to Launceston, where the Mount Royal wagonette, and a cart for the luggage, were waiting for them at the station.

'Everything right at the Mount?' asked Leonard, as Nicholls touched his hat.

Yes, sir.'

He asked for no details, but took the reins from Nicholls without another word. Captain Vandeleur jumped up by his side, Nicholls got in at the back, with a lot of the smaller luggage—gun-cases, dressing-bags, despatch-boxes—and away they went up the castle hill, and then sharp round to the right, and off at a dashing pace along the road to the moor. It was a two hours' drive even for the best goers; but Mr. Tregonell spoke hardly a dozen times during the journey, smoking all the way, and with his eyes always on his horses.

At last they wound up the hill to Mount Royal, and passed the lodge, and saw all the lights of the old wide-spreading Tudor front shining upon them through the thickening grey of early evening.

'A good old place, isn't it?' said Leonard, just a little moved at sight of the house in which he had been born. 'A man might come home to a worse shelter.'

'This man might come home to lodgings in Chelsea,' said Jack Vandeleur, touching himself lightly on the breast, with a grim laugh. 'It's a glorious old place, and you needn't apologize for being proud of it. And now we've come back, I hope you are going to be jolly, for you've been uncommonly glum while we've been away. The house looks cheerful, doesn't it? I should think it must be full of company.'

'Not likely,' answered Leonard. 'Christabel never cared about having people. We should have lived like hermits if she had had her way.'

'Then if the house isn't full of people, all I can say is there's a good deal of candle-light going to waste,' said Captain Vandeleur.

They were driving up to the porch by this time; the door stood wide open; servants were on the watch for them. The hall was all aglow with light and fire; people were moving about near the hearth. It was a relief to Leonard to see this life and brightness. He had feared to find a dark and silent house—a melancholy welcome—all things still in mourning for the untimely dead.

A ripple of laughter floated from the hall as Leonard drew up his horses, and two tall slim figures with fluffy heads, short-waisted gowns, and big sashes, came skipping down the broad shallow steps.

'My sisters, by Jove,' cried Jack, delighted. 'How awfully jolly of Mrs. Tregonell to invite them.'

Leonard's only salutation to the damsels was a friendly nod. He brushed by them as they grouped themselves about their brother—like a new edition of Laocoon without the snakes, or the three Graces without the grace—and hurried into the hall, eager to be face to face with his wife. She came forward to meet him, looking her loveliest, dressed as he had never seen her dressed before, with a style, a *chic*, and a daring more appropriate to the Théâtre Français than to a Cornish squire's house. She who, even in the height of the London season, had been simplicity itself, recalling to those who most admired her, the picture of that chaste and unworldly maiden who dwelt beside the Dove, now wore an elaborate costume of brown velvet and satin, in which a Louis Quinze velvet coat, with large cut-steel buttons and Mechlin *jabot*, was the most striking feature. Her fair, soft hair was now fluffy, and stood up in an infinity of frizzy curls from the broad white forehead. Diamond solitaires flashed in her ears, her hands glittered with the rainbow light of old family rings, which in days gone by she had been wont to leave in the repose of an iron safe. The whole woman was changed. She came to meet her husband with a Society smile; shook hands with him as if he had been a commonplace visitor—he was too startled to note the death-like coldness of that slender hand—and welcomed him with a conventional inquiry about his passage from Buenos Ayres.

He stood transfixed—overwhelmed by surprise. The room was full of people. There was Mrs. Fairfax Torrington, liveliest and most essentially modern of well-preserved widows, always *dans le mouvement*, as she said of herself; and there, lolling against the high oak chimney-piece, with an air of fatuous delight in his own attractiveness, was that Baron de Cazalet—pseudo artist, poet, and *littérateur*, who, five seasons ago, had been an object of undisguised detestation with Christabel. He, too, was essentially in the movement—æsthetic, cynical, agnostic, thought-reading, spiritualistic—always blowing the last fashionable bubble, and making his bubbles bigger and brighter than other people's—a man who prided himself upon his 'intensity' in every pursuit—from love-making to gourmandize. There, again, marked out from the rest by a thoroughly prosaic air, which, in these days of artistic sensationalism is in itself a distinction—pale, placid, taking his ease in a low basket chair, with his languid hand on Randie's black muzzle—sat Mr. FitzJesse, the journalist, proprietor and editor of *The Sling*, a fashionable weekly—the man who was always smiting the Goliahs of pretence and dishonesty with a pen that was sharper than any stone that ever David slung against the foe. He was such an amiable-looking man—had such a power of obliterating every token of intellectual force and fire from the calm surface of his countenance, that people, seeing him for the first time, were apt to stare at him in blank wonder at his innocent aspect. Was this the wielder of that scathing pen—was this the man who wrote not with ink but with aqua fortis? Even his placid matter-of-fact speech was, at first, a little disappointing. It was only by gentlest degrees that the iron hand of satire made itself felt under the velvet glove of conventional good manners. Leonard had met Mr. FitzJesse in London, at the clubs and elsewhere, and had felt that vague awe which the provincial feels for the embodied spirit of metropolitan intellect in the shape of a famous journalist. It was needful to be civil to such men, in order to be let down gently in their papers. One never knew when some rash unpremeditated act might furnish matter for a paragraph which would mean social annihilation.

There were other guests grouped about the fire-place—little Monty, the useful and good-humoured country-house hack; Colonel Blathwayt, of the Kildare Cavalry, a noted amateur actor, reciter, waltzer, spirit-rapper, invaluable in a house full of people—a tall, slim-waisted man, who rode nine stone, and at forty contrived to look seven-and-twenty; the Rev. St. Bernard Faddie, an Anglican curate, who carried Ritualism to the extremest limit consistent with the retention of his stipend as a minister of the Church of England, and who was always at loggerheads with some of his parishioners. There were Mr. and Mrs. St. Aubyn and their two daughters—county people, with loud voices, horsey, and doggy, and horticultural—always talking garden, when they were not talking stable or kennel. These were neighbours for who Christabel had cared very little in the past. Leonard was considerably astonished at finding them domiciled at Mount Royal.

'And you had a nice passage,' said his wife, smiling at her lord. 'Will you have some tea?'

It seemed a curious kind of welcome to a husband after a year's absence; but Leonard answered feebly that he would take a cup of tea. One of the numerous tea-tables had been established in a corner near the fire, and Miss Bridgeman, in neat grey silk and linen collar, as of old, was officiating, with Mr. Faddie in attendance to distribute the cups.

'No tea, thanks,' said Jack Vandeleur, coming in with his sisters still entwined about him, still faintly suggestive of that poor man and the sea-serpents. 'Would it be too dreadful if I were to suggest S. and B.?'

Jessie Bridgeman touched a spring bell on the tea-table, and gave the required order. There was a joviality, *laissez-aller* in the air of the place, with which soda and brandy seemed quite in harmony. Everything in the house seemed changed to Leonard's eye; and yet the furniture, the armour, the family portraits, brown and indistinguishable in this doubtful light, were all the same. There were no flowers about in tubs or on tables. That subtle grace—as of a thoughtful woman's hand ruling and arranging everything, artistic even where seeming most careless—was missing. Papers, books were thrown anyhow upon the tables; whips, carriage-rugs, wraps, hats, encumbered the chairs near the door. Half-a-dozen dogs—pointers, setters, collie—sprawled or prowled about the room. In nowise did his house now resemble the orderly mansion which his mother had ruled so long, and which his wife had maintained upon exactly the same lines after her aunt's death. He had grumbled at what he called a silly observance of his mother's fads. The air of the house was now much more in accordance with his own view of life, and yet the change angered him as much as it perplexed him.

'Where's the boy?' he asked, exploring the hall and its occupants, with a blank stare.

'In his nursery. Where should he be?' exclaimed Christabel, lightly.

'I thought he would have been with you. I thought he might have been here to bid me welcome home.'

He had made a picture in his mind, almost involuntarily, of the mother and child—she, calm and lovely as one of Murillo's Madonnas, with the little one on her knee. There was no vein of poetry in his nature, yet unconsciously the memory of such pictures had associated itself with his wife's image. And instead of that holy embodiment of maternal love, there flashed and sparkled before him this brilliant woman, with fair fluffy hair, and Louis Quinze coat, all a glitter with cut-steel.

'Home!' echoed Christabel, mockingly; 'how sentimental you have grown. I've no doubt the boy will be charmed to see you, especially if you have brought him some South American toys; but I thought it would bore you to see him before you had dined. He shall be on view in the drawing-room before dinner, if you would really like to see him so soon.'

'Don't trouble,' said Leonard, curtly: 'I can find my way to the nursery.'

He went upstairs without another word, leaving his friend Jack seated in the midst of the cheerful circle, drinking soda water and brandy, and talking of their adventures upon the backbone of South America.

'Delicious country!' said de Cazalet, who talked remarkably good English, with just the faintest Hibernian accent. 'I have ridden over every inch of it. Ah, Mrs. Tregonell, that is the soil for poetry and adventure; a land of extinct volcanoes. If Byron had known the shores of the Amazon, he would have struck a deeper note of passion than any that was ever inspired by the Dardanelles or the Bosphorus. Sad that so grand a spirit should have pined in the prison-house of a worn-out world.'

'I have always understood that Byron got some rather strong poetry out of Switzerland and Italy,' murmured Mr. FitzJesse, meekly.

'Weak and thin to what he might have written had he known the Pampas,' said the Baron.

'You have done the Pampas?' said Mr. FitzJesse.

'I have lived amongst wild horses, and wilder humanity, for months at a stretch.'

'And you have published a volume of—verses?'

'Another of my youthful follies. But I do not place myself upon a level with Byron.'

'I should if I were you,' said Mr. FitzJesse. 'It would be an original idea—and in an age marked by a total exhaustion of brain-power, an original idea is a pearl of price.'

'What kind of dogs did you see in your travels?' asked Emily St. Aubyn, a well-grown upstanding young woman, in a severe tailor-gown of undyed homespun.

'Two or three very fine breeds of mongrels.'

'I adore mongrels!' exclaimed Mopsy. 'I think that kind of dog, which belongs to no particular breed, which has been ill-used by London boys, and which follows one to one's doorstep, is the most faithful and intelligent of the whole canine race. Huxley may exalt Blenheim spaniels as the nearest thing to human nature; but my dog Tim, which is something between a lurcher, a collie, and a bull, is ever so much better than human nature.'

'The Blenheim is greedy, luxurious, and lazy, and generally dies in middle life from the consequences of over-feeding,' drawled Mr. FitzJesse. 'I don't think Huxley is very far out.'

'I would back a Cornish sheep-dog against any animal in creation,' said Christabel, patting Randie, who was standing amiably on end, with his fore-paws on the cushioned elbow of her chair. 'Do you know that these dogs smile when they are pleased, and cry when they are grieved—and they will mourn for a master with a fidelity unknown in humanity.'

'Which as a rule does not mourn,' said FitzJesse. 'It only goes into mourning.'

And so the talk went on, always running upon trivialities—glancing from theme to theme—a mere battledore and shuttlecock conversation—making a mock of most things and most people. Christabel joined in it all; and some of the bitterest speech that was spoken in that hour before the sounding of the seven o'clock gong, fell from her perfect lips.

'Did you ever see such a change in any one as in Mrs. Tregonell?' asked Dopsy of Mopsy, as they elbowed each other before the looking-glass, the first armed with a powder puff, the second with a little box containing the implements required for the production of piquant eyebrows.

'A wonderful improvement,' answered Mopsy. 'She's ever so much easier to get on with. I didn't think it was in her to be so thoroughly *chic*.'

'Do you know, I really liked her better last year, when she was frumpy and dowdy,' faltered Dopsy. 'I wasn't able to get on with her, but I couldn't help looking up to her, and feeling that, after all, she was the right kind of woman. And now——'

'And now she condescends to be human—to be one of us—

and the consequence is that her house is three times as nice as it was last year,' said Mopsy, turning the corner of an eyebrow with a bold but careful hand, and sending a sharp elbow into Dopsy's face during the operation.

'I wish you'd be a little more careful,' ejaculated Dopsy.

'I wish you'd contrive not to want the glass exactly when I do,' retorted Mopsy.

'How do you like the French Baron?' asked Dopsy, when a brief silence had restored her equanimity.

'French, indeed! He is no more French than I am. Mr. FitzJesse told me that he was born and brought up in Jersey—that his father was an Irish Major on half-pay, and his mother a circus rider.'

'But how does he come by his title—if it is a real title?'

'FitzJesse says the title is right enough. One of his father's ancestors came to the South of Ireland after the revocation of something—a treaty at Nancy—I think he said. He belonged to an old Huguenot family—those people who were massacred in the opera, don't you know—and the title had been allowed to go dead—till this man married a tremendously rich Sheffield cutler's daughter, and bought the old estate in Provence, and got himself enrolled in the French peerage. Romantic, isn't it?'

'Very. What became of the Sheffield cutler's daughter?'

'She drank herself to death two years after her marriage. FitzJessie says they both lived upon brandy, but she hadn't been educated up to it, and it killed her.'

'A curious kind of man for Mrs. Tregonell to invite here. Not quite good style.'

'Perhaps not—but he's very amusing.'

Leonard spent half an hour with his son. The child had escaped from babyhood in the year that had gone. He was now a bright sentient creature, eager to express his thoughts—to gather knowledge—an active, vivacious being, full of health and energy. Whatever duties Christabel had neglected during her husband's absence, the boy had, at least, suffered no neglect. Never had childhood developed under happier conditions. The father could find no fault in the nursery, though there was a vague feeling in his mind that everything was wrong at Mount Royal.

'Why the deuce did she fill the house with people while I was away,' he muttered to himself, in the solitude of his dressing-room, where his clothes had been put ready for him, and candles lighted by his Swiss valet. The dressing-room was at that end of the corridor most remote from Christabel's apartments. It communicated with the room Leonard had slept in during his boyhood and that opened again into his gun-room.

The fact that these rooms had been prepared for him told him plainly enough that he and his wife were henceforth to lead divided lives. The event of last October, his year of absence, had built up a wall between them which he, for the time being at least, felt himself powerless to knock down.

'Can she suspect—can she know'—he asked himself, pausing in his dressing to stand staring at the fire, with moody brow and troubled eyes. 'No, that's hardly possible. And yet her whole manner is changed. She holds me at a distance. Every look, every tone just now was a defiance. Of course I know that she loved that man—loved him first—last—always; never caring a straw for me. She was too careful of herself—had been brought up too well to go wrong, like other women—but she loved him. I would never have brought him inside these doors if I had not known that she could take care of herself. I tested and tried her to the uttermost—and—well—I took my change out of him.'

Mr. Tregonell dressed himself a little more carefully than he was wont to dress—thinking for the most part that anything which suited him was good enough for his friends—and went down to the drawing-room, feeling like a visitor in a strange house, half inclined to wonder how he would be received by his wife and his wife's guests. He who had always ruled supreme in that house, choosing his visitors for his own pleasure—subjugating all tastes and habits of other people to his own convenience, now felt as if he were only there on sufferance.

It was early when he entered the drawing-room, and the Baron de Cazalet was the only occupant of that apartment. He was standing in a lounging attitude, with his back against the mantelpiece, and his handsome person set off by evening dress. That regulation costume does not afford much scope to the latent love of finery which still lurks in the civilized man, as if to prove his near relationship to the bead and feather-wearing savage—but de Cazalet had made himself as gorgeous as he could with jewelled studs, embroidered shirt, satin under-waistcoat, amber silk stockings, and Queen Anne shoes. He was assuredly handsome—but he had just that style of beauty which to the fastidious mind is more revolting than positive ugliness. Dark-brown eyes, strongly arched eyebrows, an aquiline nose, a sensual mouth, a heavy jaw, a faultless complexion of the French plum-box order, large regular teeth of glittering whiteness, a small delicately trained moustache with waxed ends, and hair of oily sheen, odorous of *pommade divine*, made up the catalogue of his charms. Leonard stood looking at him doubtfully, as if he were a hitherto unknown animal.

'Where did my wife pick him up, and why?' he asked himself. 'I should have thought he was just the kind of man she would detest.'

'How glad you must be to get back to your Lares and Penates,' said the Baron, smiling blandly.

'I'm uncommonly glad to get back to my horses and dogs,' answered Leonard, flinging himself into a large arm-chair by the fire, and taking up a newspaper. 'Have you been long in the West?'

'About a fortnight, but I have been only three days at Mount Royal. I had the honour to renew my acquaintance with Mrs. Tregonell last August at Zermatt, and she was good enough to say that if I ever found myself in this part of the country she would be pleased to receive me in her house. I needn't tell you that with such a temptation in view I was very glad to bend my steps westward. I spent ten days on board a friend's yacht, between Dartmouth and the Lizard, landed at Penzance last Tuesday, and posted here, where I received a more than hospitable welcome.'

'You are a great traveller, I understand?'

'I doubt if I have done as much as you have in that way. I have seldom travelled for the sake of travelling. I have lived in the tents of the Arabs. I have bivouacked on the Pampas—and enjoyed life in all the cities of the South, from Valparaiso to Carthagena; but I can boast no mountaineering exploits or scientific discoveries—and I never read a paper at the Geographical.'

'You look a little too fond of yourself for mountaineering, said Leonard, smiling grimly at the Baron's portly figure, and all-pervading sleekness.

'Well—yes—I like a wild life—but I have no relish for absolute hardship—the thermometer below zero, a doubtful supply of provisions, pemmican, roasted skunk for supper, without any currant jelly—no, I love mine ease at mine Inn.'

He threw out his fine expanse of padded chest and shoulders, and surveyed the spacious lamp-lit room with an approving smile. This no doubt was the kind of Inn at which he loved to take his ease—a house full of silly women, ready to be subjugated by his florid good looks and shallow accomplishments.

The ladies now came straggling in—first Emily St. Aubyn, and then Dopsy, whose attempts at conversation were coldly received by the county maiden. Dopsy's and Mopsy's home-made gowns, cheap laces and frillings, and easy flippancy were not agreeable to the St. Aubyn sisters. It was not that the St. Aubyn manners, which always savoured of the stable and farmyard, were more refined or elegant; but the St. Aubyns arrogated to themselves the right to be vulgar, and resented free-and-easy manners in two young persons who were obviously poor and obviously obscure as to their surroundings. If their gowns had been made by a West End tailor, and they had been able to boast of intimate acquaintance with a duchess and two or three countessses, their flippancy might have been tolerable, nay, even amusing, to the two Miss St. Aubyns; but girls who went nowhere and knew nobody, had no right to attempt smartness of speech, and deserved to be sat upon.

To Dopsy succeeded Mopsy, then some men, then Mrs. St. Aubyn and her younger daughter Clara, then Mrs. Tregonell in a red gown draped with old Spanish lace, and with diamond stars in her hair, a style curiously different from those quiet dinner dresses she had been wont to wear a year ago. Leonard looked at her in blank amazement—just as he had looked at their first meeting. She, who had been like the violet, sheltering itself among its leaves, now obviously dressed for effect, and as obviously courted admiration.

The dinner was cheerful to riotousness. Everybody had something to say; anecdotes were told, and laughter was frequent and loud. The St. Aubyn girls, who had deliberately snubbed the sisters Vandeleur, were not above conversing with the brother, and, finding him a kindred spirit in horseyness and doggyness, took him at once into their confidence, and were on the friendliest terms before dinner was finished. De Cazalet sat next his hostess, and talked exclusively to her. Mr. FitzJesse had Miss Bridgeman on his left hand, and conversed with her in gentle murmurs, save when in his quiet voice, and with his seeming-innocent smile, he told some irresistibly funny story—some touch of character seen with a philosophic eye—for the general joy of the whole table. Very different was the banquet of to-day from that quiet dinner on the first night of Mr. Hamleigh's visit to Mount Royal, that dinner at which Leonard watched his wife so intensely, eager to discover to what degree she was affected by the presence of her first lover. He watched her to-night, at the head of her brilliantly lighted dinner-table —no longer the old subdued light of low shaded lamps, but the radiance of innumerable candles in lofty silver candelabra, shining over a striking decoration of vivid crimson asters and spreading palm-leaves—he watched her helplessly, hopelessly, knowing that he and she were ever so much farther apart than they had been in the days before he brought Angus Hamleigh to Mount Royal, those miserable discontented days when he had fretted himself into a fever of jealousy and vague suspicion, and had thought to find a cure by bringing the man he feared and hated into his home, so that he might know for certain how deep the wrong was which this man's very existence seemed to inflict upon him. To bring those two who had loved and parted face to face, to watch and listen, to fathom the thoughts of each—that had been the process natural and congenial to his jealous temper; but the result had been an uncomfortable one. And now he saw his wife, whose heart he had tried to break—hating her because he had failed to make her love him—just as remote and unapproachable as of old.

'What a fool I was to marry her,' he thought, after replying somewhat at random to Mrs. St. Aubyn's last remark upon the superiority of Dorkings to Spaniards from a culinary point of view. 'It was my determination to have my own way that wrecked me. I couldn't submit to be conquered by a girl—to have the wife I had set my heart upon when I was a boy, stolen from me by the first effeminate fopling my silly mother invited to Mount Royal. I had never imagined myself with any other woman for my wife—never really cared for any other woman.'

This was the bent of Mr. Tregonell's reflections as he sat in his place at that animated assembly, adding nothing to its mirth, or even to its noise ; albeit in the past his voice had ever been loudest, his laugh most resonant. He felt more at his ease after dinner, when the women had left—the brilliant de Cazalet slipping away soon after them, although not until he had finished his host's La Rose—and when Mr. St. Aubyn expanded himself in county talk, enlightening the wanderer as to the progress of events during his absence—while Mr. FitzJesse sat blandly puffing his cigarette, a silent observer of the speech and gestures of the county magnate, speculating, from a scientific point of view, as to how much of this talk were purely automatic—an inane drivel which would go on just the same if half the Squire's brain had been scooped out. Jack Vandeleur smoked and drank brandy and water, while little Monty discoursed to him, in confidential tones, upon the racing year which was now expiring at Newmarket—the men who had made pots of money, and the men who had been beggared for life. There seemed to be no medium between those extremes.

When the host rose, Captain Vandeleur was for an immediate adjournment to billiards, but, to his surprise, Leonard walked off to the drawing-room.

'Aren't you coming?' asked Jack, dejectedly.

'Not to-night. I have been too long away from feminine society not to appreciate the novelty of an evening with ladies. You and Monty can have the table to yourselves, unless Mr. FitzJesse——'

'I never play,' replied the gentle journalist ; 'but I rather like sitting in a billiard-room and listening to the conversation of the players. It is always so full of ideas.'

Captain Vandeleur and Mr. Montagu went their way, and the other men repaired to the drawing-room, whence came the sound of the piano, and the music of a rich baritone, trolling out a popular air from the most fashionable opera-bouffe—that one piece which all Paris was bent upon hearing at the same moment, whereby seats in the little Boulevard theatre were selling at a ridiculous premium.

De Cazalet was singing to Mrs. Tregonell's accompaniment—a *patois* song, with a refrain which would have been distinctly indecent, if the tails of all the words had not been clipped off, so as to reduce the language to mild idiocy.

'The kind of song one could fancy being fashionable in the decline of the Roman Empire,' said FitzJesse, 'when Apuleius was writing his "Golden Ass," don't you know.'

After the song came a duet from 'Traviata,' in which Christabel sang with a dramatic power which Leonard never remembered to have heard from her before. The two voices harmonized admirably, and there were warm expressions of delight from the listeners.

'Very accomplished man, de Cazalet,' said Colonel Blathwayt; 'uncommonly useful in a country house—sings, and plays, and recites, and acts—rather puffy and short-winded in his elocution—if he were a horse one would call him a roarer—but always ready to amuse. Quite an acquisition.'

'Who is he?' asked Leonard, looking glum. 'My wife picked him up in Switzerland, I hear—that is to say, he seems to have made himself agreeable—or useful—to Mrs. Tregonell and Miss Bridgeman; and in a moment of ill-advised hospitality, my wife asked him here. Is he received anywhere? Does anybody know anything about him?'

'He is received in a few houses—rich houses where the hostess goes in for amateur acting and *tableaux vivants*, don't you know; and people know a good deal about him—nothing actually to his detriment. The man was a full-blown adventurer when he had the good luck to get hold of a rich wife. He pays his way now, I believe; but the air of the adventurer hangs round him still. A man of Irish parentage—brought up in Jersey. What can you expect of him?'

'Does he drink!'

'Like a fish—but his capacity to drink is only to be estimated by cubic space—the amount he can hold. His brain and constitution have been educated up to alcohol. Nothing can touch him further.'

'Colonel Blathwayt, we want you to give us the "Wonderful One-Horse Shay," and after that, the Baron is going to recite "James Lee's Wife," said Mrs. Tregonell, while her guests ranged themselves into an irregular semicircle, and the useful Miss Bridgeman placed a *prie-dieu* chair in a commanding position for the reciter to lean upon gracefully, or hug convulsively in the more energetic passages of his recitation.

'Everybody seems to have gone mad,' thought Mr. Tregonell, as he seated himself and surveyed the assembly, all intent and expectant.

His wife sat near the piano with de Cazalet bending over her, talking in just that slightly lowered voice which gives an idea of confidential relation, yet may mean no more than a vain man's desire to appear the accepted worshipper of a beautiful woman. Never had Leonard seen Angus Hamleigh's manner so distinctively attentive as was the air of this Hibernian adventurer.

'Just the last man whose attentions I should have supposed she would tolerate,' thought Leonard; 'but any garbage is food for a woman's vanity.'

The 'Wonderful One-Horse Shay' was received with laughter and delight. Dopsy and Mopsy were in raptures. 'How could a horrid American have written anything so clever? But then it was Colonel Blathwayt's inimitable elocution which gave a charm to the whole thing. The poem was poor enough, no doubt, if one read it to oneself. Colonel Blathwayt was adorably funny.'

'It's a tremendous joke, as you do it,' said Mopsy, twirling her sunflower fan—a great yellow flower, like the sign of the Sun Inn, on a black satin ground. 'How delightful to be so gifted.'

'Now, for "James Lee's Wife,"' said the Colonel, who accepted the damsel's compliments for what they were worth. 'You'll have to be very attentive if you want to find out what the poem means; for the Baron's delivery is a trifle spasmodic.'

And now de Cazalet stepped forward with a vellum-bound volume in his hand, dashed back his long sleek hair with a large white hand, glanced at the page, coughed faintly, and then began in thick hurried accents, which kept getting thicker and more hurried as the poem advanced. It was given, not in lines, but is spasms, panted out, till at the close the Baron sank exhausted, breathless, like the hunted deer when the hounds close round him.

'Beautiful! exquisite! too pathetic!' exclaimed a chorus of feminine voices.

'I only wish the Browning Society could hear that: they would be delighted,' said Mr. Faddie, who piqued himself upon being in the literary world.

'It makes Browning so much easier to understand,' remarked Mr. FitzJesse, with his habitual placidity.

'Brings the whole thing home to you—makes it ever so much more real, don't you know,' said Mrs. Torrington.

'Poor James Lee!' sighed Mopsy.

'Poor Mrs. Lee!' ejaculated Dopsy.

'Did he die?' asked Miss St. Aubyn.

'Did she run away from him?' inquired her sister, the railroad pace at which the Baron fired off the verses having left all those among his hearers who did not know the text in a state of agreeable uncertainty.

So the night wore on, with more songs and duets from opera and opera-bouffe. No more of Beethoven's grand bursts of melody—now touched with the solemnity of religious feeling—now melting in human pathos—now light and airy, changeful and capricious as the skylark's song—a very fountain of joyous fancies. Mr. Tregonell had never appreciated Beethoven, being indeed, as unmusical a soul as God ever created; but he thought it a more respectable thing that his wife should sit at her piano playing an order of music which only the privileged few could understand, than that she should delight the common herd by singing which savoured of music-hall and burlesque.

'Is she not absolutely delicious?' said Mrs. Torrington, beating time with her fan. 'How proud I should be of myself if I could sing like that. How proud you must be of your wife—such verve—such *élan*—so thoroughly in the spirit of the thing. That is the only kind of singing anybody really cares for now. One goes to the opera to hear them scream through "Lohengrin"—or "Tannhauser"—and then one goes into society and talks about Wagner—but it is music like this one enjoys.'

'Yes, it's rather jolly,' said Leonard, staring moodily at his wife, in the act of singing a refrain of Bé-bé-bé, which was supposed to represent the bleating of an innocent lamb.

'And the Baron's voice goes so admirably with Mrs. Tregonell's.'

'Yes, his voice goes—admirably,' said Leonard, sorely tempted to blaspheme.

'Weren't you charmed to find us all so gay and bright here—nothing to suggest the sad break-up you had last year. I felt so intensely sorry for you all—yet I was selfish enough to be glad I had left before it happened. Did they—don't think me morbid for asking—did they bring him home here?'

'Yes, they brought him home.'

'And in which room did they put him? One always wants to know these things, though it can do one no good.'

'In the Blue Room.'

'The second from the end of the corridor, next but one to mine; that's rather awfully near. Do you believe in spiritual influences? Have you ever had a revelation? Good gracious! is it really so late? Everybody seems to be going.'

'Let me get your candle,' said Leonard, eagerly, making a dash for the hall. And so ended his first evening at home with that imbecile refrain—Bé-bé-bé, repeating itself in his ears.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

'GAI DONC, LA VOYAGEUSE, AU COUP DU PELERIN!'

When Mr. Tregonell came to the breakfast room next morning he found everybody alert with the stir and expectation of an agreeable day. The Trevena harriers were to meet for the first time this season, and everybody was full of that event. Christabel, Mrs. Torrington, and the St. Aubyn girls were breakfasting in their habits and hats: whips and gloves were lying about on chairs and side-tables—everybody was talking, and everybody seemed in a hurry. De Cazalet looked gorgeous in olive corduroy and Newmarket boots. Mr. St. Aubyn looked business-like in a well-worn red coat and mahogany tops, while the other men inclined to dark shooting jackets, buckskins, and Napoleons. Mr. FitzJesse, in a morning suit that savoured of the study rather than the hunting field, contemplated these Nimrods with an amused smile; but the Reverend St. Bernard beheld them not without pangs of envy. He, too, had been in Arcadia; he, too, had followed the hounds in his green Oxford days, before he joined that band of young Anglicans who he doubted not would by-and-by be as widely renowned as the heroes of the Tractarian movement.

'You are going to the meet?' inquired Leonard, as his wife handed him his coffee.

'Do you think I would take the trouble to put on my habit in order to ride from here to Trevena?' exclaimed Christabel. 'I am going with the rest of them, of course. Emily St. Aubyn will show me the way.'

'But you have never hunted.'

'Because your dear mother was too nervous to allow me. But I have ridden over every inch of the ground. I know my horse, and my horse knows me. You needn't be afraid.'

'Mrs. Tregonell is one of the finest horsewomen I ever saw,' said de Cazalet. 'It is a delight to ride by her side. Are not you coming with us?' he asked.

'Yes, I'll ride after you,' said Leonard. 'I forgot all about the harriers. Nobody told me they were to begin work this morning.'

The horses were brought round to the porch, the ladies put on their gloves, and adjusted themselves in those skimpy lop-sided petticoats which have replaced the flowing drapery of the dark ages when a horsewoman's legs and boots were in somewise a mystery to the outside world.

Leonard went out to look at the horses. A strange horse would have interested him even on his death bed, while one ray of consciousness yet remained to recognize the degrees of equine strength and quality. He overhauled the mare which Major Bree had chosen for Christabel a month ago—a magnificent three-quarter bred hunter, full of power.

'Do you think she can carry me?' asked Christabel.

'She could carry a house. Yes; you ought to be safe upon her. Is that big black brute the Baron's horse?'

'Yes.'

'I thought so—a coarse clumsy beast, all show,' muttered Leonard: 'like master, like man.'

He turned away to examine Colonel Blathwayt's hunter, a good looking chestnut, and in that moment the Baron had taken up his ground by Christabel's mare, and was ready to lift her into the saddle. She went up as lightly as a shuttlecock from a battledore, scarcely touching the corduroy shoulder—but Leonard felt angry with the Baron for usurping a function which should have been left for the husband.

'Is Betsy Baker in condition?' he asked the head groom, as the party rode away, de Cazalet on Mrs. Tregonell's right hand.

'Splendid, sir. She only wants work.'

'Get her ready as quick as you can. I'll take it out of her.'

Mr. Tregonell kept his word. Wherever de Cazalet and

Christabel rode that day, Christabel's husband went with them. The Baron was a bold, bad rider—reckless of himself, brutal to his horse. Christabel rode superbly, and was superbly mounted. Those hills which seemed murderous to the stranger, were as nothing to her, who had galloped up and down them on her Shetland pony, and had seldom ridden over better ground from the time when Major Bree first took her out with a leading rein. The day was long, and there was plenty of fast going—but these three were always in the front. Yet even the husband's immediate neighbourhood in no wise lessened the Baron's marked attention to the wife, and Leonard rode homeward at dusk sorely troubled in spirit. What did it mean? Could it be that she, whose conduct last year had seemed without reproach; who had borne herself with matronly dignity, with virginal purity towards the lover of her girlhood—the refined and accomplished Angus Hamleigh—could it be that she had allowed herself to be involved in a flirtation with such a tinsel dandy as this de Cazalet?

'It would be sheer lunacy,' he said to himself. 'Perhaps she is carrying on like this to annoy me—punishing me for——'

He rode home a little way behind those other two, full of vexation and bewilderment. Nothing had happened of which he could reasonably complain. He could scarcely kick this man out of his house because he inclined his head at a certain angle—or because he dropped his voice to a lower key when he spoke to Christabel. Yet his very attitude in the saddle as he rode on ahead—his hand on his horse's flank, his figure turned towards Christabel—was a provocation.

Opera bouffe duets—recitations—acting charades—*bouts rimes*—all the catalogue of grown-up playfulness—began again after dinner; but this evening Leonard did not stay in the drawing-room. He felt that he could not trust himself. His disgust must needs explode into some rudeness of speech if he remained to witness these vagaries.

'I like the society of barmaids, and I can tolerate the company of ladies,' he said to his bosom friend Jack; but a mixture of the two is unendurable: so we'll have a good smoke and half-crown pool, shilling lives.'

This was as much as to say, that Leonard and his other friends were about to render their half-crowns and shillings as tribute to Captain Vandeleur's superior play; that gentleman having made pool his profession since he left the army.

They played till midnight, in an atmosphere which grew thick with tobacco smoke before the night was done. They played till Jack Vandeleur's pockets were full of loose silver, and till the other men had come to the conclusion that pool was a slow game, with an element of childishness in it, at the best—no real skill, only a mere mechanical knack, acquired by incessant practice in fusty public rooms, reeking with alcohol.

'Show me a man who plays like that, and I'll show you a scamp,' muttered little Monty in a friendly aside to Leonard, as Jack Vandeleur swept up the last pool.

'I know he's a scamp,' answered Leonard, 'but he's a pleasant scamp, and a capital fellow to travel with—never ill—never out of temper—always ready for the day's work, whatever it is, and always able to make the best of things. Why don't you marry one of his sisters?—they're both jolly good fellows.'

'No coin,' said Monty, shaking his neat little flaxen head. 'I can just contrive to keep myself—"still to be neat, still to be drest." What in mercy's name should I do with a wife who would want food and gowns, and stalls at the theatres? I have been thinking that if those St. Aubyn girls have money—on the nail, you know, not in the form of expectations from that painfully healthy father—I might think seriously of one of them. They are horridly rustic—smell of clover and beans, and would be likely to disgrace one in London society—but they are not hideous.'

'I don't think there's much ready money in that quarter Monty,' answered Leonard. 'St. Aubyn has a good deal of land.'

'Land,' screamed Monty. 'I wouldn't touch it with a pair of tongs! The workhouses of the next century will be peopled by the offspring of the landed gentry. I shudder when I think of the country squire and his prospects.'

'Hard lines,' said Jack, who had made that remark two or three times before in the course of the evening.

They were sitting round the fire by this time—smoking and drinking mulled Burgundy, and the conversation had become general.

This night was as many other nights. Sometimes Mr. Tregonell tried to live through the evening in the drawing-room—enduring the society games—the Boulevard music—the recitations and tableaux and general frivolity—but he found these amusements hang upon his spirits like a nightmare. He watched his wife, but could discover nothing actually reprehensible in her conduct—nothing upon which he could take his stand as an outraged husband and say 'This shall not be.' If the Baron's devotion to her was marked enough for every one to see, and if her acceptance of his attentions was gracious in the extreme, his devotion and her graciousness were no more than he had seen everywhere accepted as the small change of society, meaning nothing, tending towards nothing but gradual satiety; except in those few exceptional cases which ended in open scandal and took society by surprise. That which impressed Leonard was the utter change in his wife's character. It seemed as if her very nature were altered. Womanly tenderness, a gentle and subdued manner, had given place to a hard brilliancy. It was, as if he had lost a pearl, and found a diamond in its place—one all softness and purity, the other all sparkle and light.

He was too proud to sue to her for any renewal of old confidences—to claim from her any of the duties of a wife. If she could live and be happy without him—and he knew but too surely that his presence, his affection, had never contributed to her happiness—he would let her see that he could live without her—that he was content to accept the position she had chosen—union which was no union—marriage that had ceased to be marriage—a chain drawn out to its furthest length, yet held so lightly that neither need feel the bondage.

Everybody at Mount Royal was loud in praise of Christabel. She was so brilliant, so versatile, she made her house so utterly charming. This was the verdict of her new friends—but her old friends were less enthusiastic. Major Bree came to the Manor House very seldom now, and frankly owned himself a fish out of water in Mrs. Tregonell's new circle.

'Everybody is so laboriously lively,' he said; 'there is an air of forced hilarity. I sigh for the house as it was in your mother's time, Leonard. "A haunt of ancient peace."'

'There's not much peace about it now, by Jove,' said Leonard. 'Why did you put it into my wife's head to ride to hounds?'

'I had nothing to do with it. She asked me to choose her a hunter, and I chose her something good and safe, that's all But I don't think you ought to object to her hunting, Leonard, or to her doing anything else that may help to keep her in good spirits. She was in a very bad way all the winter.'

'Do you mean that she was seriously ill? Their letters to me were so d——d short. I hardly know anything that went on while I was away.'

'Yes. She was very ill—given over to melancholy. It was only natural that she should be affected by Angus Hamleigh's death, when you remember what they had been to each other before you came home. A woman may break an engagement of that kind, and may be very happy in her union with another man, but she can't forget her first lover, if it were only because he *is* the first. It was an unlucky thing your bringing him to Mount Royal. One of your impulsive follies.'

'Yes, one of my follies. So you say that Christabel was out of health and spirits all the winter.'

'Yes, she would see no one—not even me—or the Rector. No one but the doctor ever crossed the threshold. But surely Miss Bridgeman has told you all about it. Miss Bridgeman was devoted to her.'

'Miss Bridgeman is as close as the grave; and I am not going to demean myself by questioning her.'

'Well, there is no need to be unhappy about the past. Christabel is herself again, thank God—brighter, prettier than ever. That Swiss tour with Miss Bridgeman and the boy did her worlds of good. I thought you made a mistake in leaving her at Mount Royal after that melancholy event. You should have taken her with you.'

'Perhaps I ought to have done so,' assented Leonard, thinking bitterly how very improbable it was that she would have consented to go with him.

He tried to make the best of his position, painful as it was. He blustered and hectored as of old—gave his days to field sports—his evenings for the most part to billiards and tobacco. He drank more than he had been accustomed to drink, sat up late of nights. His nerves were not benefited by these latter habits.

'Your hand is as shaky as an old woman's,' exclaimed Jack, upon his opponent missing an easy cannon. 'Why, you might have done that with a boot-jack. If you're not careful you'll be in for an attack of del. trem., and that will chaw you up in a very short time. A man of your stamina is the worst kind of subject for nervous diseases. We shall have you catching flies, and seeing imaginary snow-storms before long.'

Leonard received this friendly warning with a scornful laugh.

'De Cazalet drinks more brandy in a day than I do in a week,' he said.

'Ah, but look at his advantages—brought up in Jersey, where cognac is duty-free. None of us have had his fine training. Wonderful constitution he must have—hand as steady as a rock. You saw him this morning knock off a particular acorn from the oak in the stable yard with a bullet.'

'Yes, the fellow can shoot; he's less of an impostor than I expected.'

'Wonderful eye and hand. He must have spent years of his life in a shooting gallery. You're a dooced good shot, Tregonell; but, compared with him, you're not in it.'

'That's very likely, though I have had to live by my gun in the Rockies. FitzJesse told me that in South America de Cazalet was known as a professed duellist.'

'And you have only shot four-footed beasts—never gone for a fellow creature,' answered Jack, lightly.

CHAPTER XXIX.

'TIME TURNS THE OLD DAYS TO DERISION.'

If Leonard Tregonell was troubled and perplexed by the change in his wife's character, there was one other person at Mount Royal, Christabel's nearest and dearest friend, to whom that change was even a greater mystification. Jessie Bridgeman, who had been with her in the dark hours of her grief—who had seen her sunk in the apathy of despair—who had comforted and watched her, and sympathized and wept with her, looked on now in blank wonderment at a phase of character which was altogether enigmatical. She had been with Mrs. Tregonell at

Zermatt, when de Cazalet had obtruded himself on their notice by his officious attentions during a pilgrimage to the Riffel, and she had been bewildered at Christabel's civility to a man of such obvious bad style. He had stayed at the same hotel with them for three or four days, and had given them as much of his society as he could without being absolutely intrusive, taking advantage of having met Christabel five seasons ago, at two or three *quasi* literary assemblies; and at parting Christabel had invited him to Mount Royal. 'Mr. Tregonell will be at home in the autumn,' she said, 'and if you should find yourself in Cornwall'—he had talked of exploring the West of England—'I know he would be glad to see you at Mount Royal.'

When Jessie hinted at the unwisdom of an invitation to a man of whom they knew so little, Christabel answered carelessly that 'Leonard liked to have his house full of lively people, and would no doubt be pleased with the Baron de Cazalet.'

'You used to leave him to choose his own visitors.'

'I know; but I mean to take a more active part in the arrangement of things in future. I am tired of being a cipher.'

'Did you hear those people talking of the Baron at *table d'hôte* yesterday?'

'I heard a little—I was not particularly attentive.'

'Then perhaps you did not hear that he is a thorough Bohemian—that he led a very wild life in South America, and was a notorious duellist.'

'What can that matter to us, even if it is true?'

It seemed to Jessie that Christabel's whole nature underwent a change, and that the transformation dated from her acquaintance with this man. They were at the end of their tour at the time of this meeting, and they came straight through to Paris, where Mrs. Tregonell abandoned herself to frivolity—going to all the theatres—buying all the newest and lightest music—spending long mornings with milliners and dressmakers—squandering money upon fine clothes, which a year ago she would have scorned to wear. Hitherto her taste had tended to simplicity of attire—not without richness—for she was too much of an artist not to value the artistic effects of costly fabrics, the beauty of warm colouring. But she now pursued that Will o' the Wisp fashion from Worth to Pingat, and bought any number of gowns, some of which, to Miss Bridgeman's severe taste, seemed simply odious.

'Do you intend spending next season in May Fair, and do you expect to be asked to a good many fancy balls?' asked Jessie, as Mrs. Tregonell's maid exhibited the gowns in the spacious bed-room at the Bristol.

'Nonsense, Jessie. These are all dinner gowns. The infinite variety of modern fashion is its chief merit. The style of to-day embraces three centuries of the past, from Catherine de Médicis to Madame Récamier.'

At one of the Boulevard theatres Mrs. Tregonell and Miss Bridgeman met Mr. FitzJesse, who was also returning from a summer holiday. He was Angus Hamleigh's friend, and had known Christabel during the happy days of her first London season. It seemed hardly strange that she should be glad to meet him, and that she should ask him to Mount Royal.

And now I must have some women to meet these men,' she said, when she and Jessie were at home again, and the travelled infant had gone back to his nursery, and had inquired why the hills he saw from his windows were no longer white, and why the sea was so much bigger than the lakes he had seen lately. 'I mean to make the house as pleasant as possible for Leonard when he comes home.'

She and Jessie were alone in the oak-panelled parlour—the room with the alcove overlooking the hills and the sea. They were seated at a little table in this recess—Christabel's desk open before her—Jessie knitting.

'How gaily you speak. Have you——'

She was going to say, 'Have you forgiven him for what was done at St. Nectan's Kieve?' but she checked herself when the words were on her lips. What if Leonard's crime was not forgiven, but forgetten? In that long dreary winter they had never spoken of the manner of Angus Hamleigh's death. Christabel's despair had been silent. Jessie had comforted her with vague words which never touched upon the cruel details of her grief. How if the mind had been affected by that long interval of sorrow and the memory of Leonard's deed blotted out? Christabel's new delight in frivolous things—her sudden fancy for filling her house with lively people—might be the awakening of new life and vigour in a mind that had trembled on the confines of madness. Was it for her to recall bitter facts—to reopen the fountain of tears? She gave one little sigh for the untimely dead—and then addressed herself to the duty of pleasing Christabel, just as in days gone by her every effort had been devoted to making the elder Mrs. Tregonell happy.

'I suppose you had better ask Mrs. Fairfax Torrington,' she suggested.

'Yes, Leonard and she are great chums. We must have Mrs. Torrington. And there are the St. Aubyns, nice lively girls, and an inoffensive father and mother. I believe Leonard rather likes them. And then it will be a charity to have Dopsy and Mopsy.'

'I thought you detested them.'

'No, poor foolish things—I was once sorry for Dopsy.' The tears rushed to her eyes. She rose suddenly from her chair, and went to the window.

'Then she has not forgotten,' thought Jessie.

So it was that the autumn party was planned. Mr. Faddie was doing duty at the little church in the glen, and thus happened to be in the way of an invitation. Mr. Montagu was asked as a person of general usefulness. The St. Aubyn party brought horses, and men and maids, and contributed much to the liveliness of the establishment, so far as noise means gaiety. They were all assembled when Baron de Cazalet telegraphed from a yacht off the Lizard to ask if he might come, and, receiving a favourable reply, landed at Penzance, and posted over with his valet; his horse and gun cases were brought from London by another servant.

Leonard had been home nearly a fortnight, and had begun to accept this new mode of life without further wonder, and to fall into his old ways, and find some degree of pleasure in his old occupations—hunting, shooting.

The Vandeleur girls were draining the cup of pleasure to the dregs. Dopsy forgot her failure and grief of last year. One cannot waste all one's life in mourning for a lover who was never in love with one.

'I wore bugles for him all last winter, and if I had been able to buy a new black gown I would have kept in mourning for six months,' she told her sister apologetically, as if ashamed of her good spirits, 'but I can't help enjoying myself in such a house as this. Is not Mrs. Tregonell changed for the better?'

'Everything is changed for the better,' assented Mopsy. 'If we had only horses and could hunt, like those stuck up St. Aubyn girls, life would be perfect.'

'They ride well, I suppose,' said Dopsy, 'but they are dreadfully *arriérées*. They haven't an æsthetic idea. When I told them we had thoughts of belonging to the Browning Society, that eldest one asked me if it was like the Birkbeck, and if we should be able to buy a house rent free by monthly instalments. And the youngest said that sunflowers were only fit for cottage gardens.'

'And the narrow-minded mother declared she could see no beauty in single dahlias,' added Dopsy, with ineffable disgust.

The day was hopelessly wet, and the visitors at Mount Royal were spending the morning in that somewhat straggling manner common to people who are in somebody else's house—impressed with a feeling that it is useless to settle oneself even to the interesting labour of art needlework when one is not by one's own fireside. The sportsmen were all out; but de Cazalet, the Rev. St. Bernard, and Mr. FitzJesse preferred the shelter of a well-warmed Jacobean mansion to the wild sweep of the wind across the moor, or the dash of the billows.

'I have had plenty of wild life on the shores of the Pacific,' said de Cazalet, luxuriating in a large green plush arm-chair, one of the anachronisms of the grave old library. 'At home I revel in civilization—I cannot have too much of warmth and comfort—velvety nests like this to lounge in, downy cushions to lean against, hothouse flowers, and French cookery. Delicious to hear the rain beating against the glass, and the wind howling in the chimney. Put another log on Faddie. like the best of fellows.'

The Reverend St. Bernard, not much appreciating this familiarity, daintily picked a log from the big brazen basket and dropped it in a gingerly manner upon the hearth, carefully dusting his fingers afterwards with a cambric handkerchief which sent forth odours of Maréchale.

Mr. FitzJesse was sitting at a distant table, with a large despatch box and a pile of open letters before him, writing at railway speed, in order to be in time for the one o'clock post.

'He is making up his paper,' said de Cazalet, lazily contemplating the worker's bowed shoulders. 'I wonder if he is saying anything about us.'

'I am happy to say that he does not often discuss church matters,' said Mr. Faddie. 'He shows his good sense by a careful avoidance of opinion upon our difficulties and our differences.'

'Perhaps he doesn't think them worth discussing—of no more consequence than the shades of difference between tweedledum and twedledee,' yawned de Cazalet, whereupon Mr. Faddie gave him a look of contemptuous anger, and left the room.

Mr. FitzJesse went away soon afterwards with his batch of letters for the post-bag in the hall, and the Baron was left alone in listless contemplation of the fire. He had been in the drawing room, but had found that apartment uninteresting by reason of Mrs. Tregonell's absence. He did not care to sit and watch the two Miss St. Aubyns playing chess—nor to hear Mrs. Fairfax Torrington dribbling out stray paragraphs from the 'society journals' for the benefit of nobody in particular—nor to listen to Mrs. St. Aubyn's disquisitions upon the merits of Alderney cows, with which Jessie Bridgeman made believe to be interested, while deep in the intricacies of a crewel-work daffodil. For him the spacious pink and white panelled room without one particular person was more desolate than the wild expanse of the Pampas, with its low undlations, growing rougher towards the base of the mountains. He had come to the library—an apartment chiefly used by the men—to bask in the light of the fire, and to brood upon agreeable thoughts. The meditations of a man who has a very high opinion of his own merits are generally pleasant, and just now Oliver de Cazalet's idea about himself were unusually exalted, for had he not obviously made the conquest of one of the most charming women he had ever met.

'A pity she has a husband,' he thought. 'It would have suited me remarkably well to drop into such a luxurious nest as this. The boy is not three years old—by the time he came of age—well—I should have lived my life, I suppose, and could afford to subside into comfortable obscurity,' sighed de Cazalet, conscious of his forty years. 'The husband looks uncommonly tough; but even Hercules was mortal. One never knows how or when a man of that stamp may go off the hooks.'

These pleasing reflections were disturbed by the entrance of Mopsy, who, after prowling all over the house in quest of masculine society, came yawning into the library in search of anything readable in the way of a newspaper—a readable paper with Mopsy meaning theatres, fashions, or scandal.

She gave a little start at sight of de Cazalet, whose stalwart form and florid good looks were by no means obnoxious to her taste. If he had not been so evidently devoted to Mrs. Tregonell, Mopsy would have perchance essayed his subjugation ; but, remembering Dopsy's bitter experience of last year, the sadder and wiser Miss Vandeleur had made up her mind not to 'go for' any marriageable man in too distinct a manner. She would play that fluking game which she most affected at billiards—sending her ball spinning all over the table with the hope that some successful result must come of a vigorous stroke.

She fluttered about the room, then stopped in a Fra Angelico pose over a table strewed with papers.

'Baron, have you seen the *Queen?*' she asked presently.

'Often. I had the honour of making my bow to her last April. She is one of the dearest women I know, and she was good enough to feel interested in my somewhat romantic career.'

'How nice ! But I mean the *Queen* newspaper. I am dying to know if it really *is* coming in. Now it has been seen in Paris, I'm afraid it's inevitable.'

'May I ask what *it* is ?'

'Perhaps I oughtn't to mention it—crinoline. There is a talk about something called a crinolette.'

'And Crinolette, I suppose, is own sister to Crinoline !'

'I'm afraid so—don't you hate them ? I do ; I love the early Italian style—clinging cashmeres, soft flowing draperies.'

'And accentuated angles—well, yes. If one has to ride in a hansom or a single brougham with a woman the hoop and powder style is rather a burthen. But women are such lovely beings—they are adorable in any costume. Madame Tallien with bare feet, and no petticoats to speak of—Pompadour in patches and wide-spreading brocade—Margaret of Orleans in a peaked head dress and puffed sleeves—Mary Stuart in a black velvet coif, and a ruff—each and all adorable—on a pretty woman.'

'On a pretty woman—yes. The pretty women set the fashions and the ugly women have to wear them—that's the difficulty.'

'Ah, me,' sighed the Baron, 'did any one ever see an ugly woman ? There are so many degrees of beauty that it takes a long time to get from Venus to her opposite. A smile—a sparkle —a kindly look—a fresh complexion—a neat bonnet—vivacious conversation—such trifles will pass for beauty with a man who worships the sex. For him every flower in the garden of womanhood, from the imperial rose to the lowly buttercup, has its own peculiar charm.'

'And yet I should have thought you were awfully fastidious, said Mopsy, trifling with the newspapers, 'and that nothing short of absolute perfection would please you.'

'Absolute perfection is generally a bore. I have met famous beauties who had no more attraction than if they had been famous statues.'

'Yes; I know there is a cold kind of beauty—but there are women who are as fascinating as they are lovely. Our hostess, for instance—don't you think her utterly sweet?'

'She is very lovely. Do come and sit by the fire. It is such a creepy morning. I'll hunt for any newspapers you like presently; but in the meanwhile let us chat. I was getting horribly tired of my own thoughts when you came in.'

Mopsy simpered, and sat down in the easy chair opposite the Baron's. She began to think that this delightful person admired her more than she had hitherto supposed. His desire for her company looked promising. What if, after all, she, who had striven so much less eagerly than poor Dopsy strove last year, should be on the high road to a conquest. Here was the handsomest man she had ever met, a man with title and money, courting her society in a house full of people.

'Yes, she is altogether charming,' said the Baron lazily, as if he were talking merely for the sake of conversation. 'Very sweet, as you say, but not quite my style—there is a something—an intangible something wanting. She has *chic*—she has *savoir-faire*, but she has not—no, she has not that electrical wit which—I have admired in others less conventionally beautiful.'

The Baron's half-veiled smile, a smile glancing from under lowered eyelids, hinted that this vital spark which was wanting in Christabel might be found in Mopsy.

The damsel blushed, and looked down conscious of eyelashes artistically treated.

'I don't think Mrs. Tregonell has been quite happy in her married life,' said Mopsy. 'My brother and Mr. Tregonell are very old friends, don't you know; like brothers, in fact; and Mr. Tregonell tells Jack everything. I know his cousin didn't want to marry him—she was engaged to somebody else, don't you know, and that engagement was broken off, but he had set his heart upon marrying her—and his mother had set her heart upon the match—and between them they talked her into it. She never really wanted to marry him—Leonard has owned that to Jack in his savage moods. But I ought not to run on so—I am doing very wrong'—said Mopsy, hastily.

'You may say anything you please to me. I am like the grave. I never give up a secret,' said the Baron, who had settled himself comfortably in his chair, assured that Mopsy once set going, would tell him all she could tell.

'No, I don't believe—from what Jack says he says in his tempers—I don't believe she ever liked him,' pursued Mopsy.

'And she was desperately in love with the other one. But she gave him up at her aunt's instigation, because of some early intrigue of his—which was absurd, as she would have known, poor thing, if she had not been brought up in this out-of-the-way corner of the world.'

'The other one. Who was the other one?' asked the Baron.

'The man who was shot at St. Nectan's Kieve last year. You must have heard the story.'

'Yes; Mr. St. Aubyn told me about it. And this Mr. Hamleigh had been engaged to Mrs. Tregonell? Odd that he should be staying in this house!'

'Wasn't it? One of those odd things that Leonard Tregonell is fond of doing. He was always eccentric.

'And during this visit was there anything—the best of women are mortal—was there anything in the way of a flirtation going on between Mrs. Tregonell and her former sweetheart?'

'Not a shadow of impropriety,' answered Mopsy heartily. 'She behaved perfectly. I knew the story from my brother, and couldn't help watching them—there was nothing underhand—not the faintest indication of a secret understanding between them.'

'And Mr. Tregonell was not jealous?'

'I cannot say; but I am sure he had no cause.'

'I suppose Mrs. Tregonell was deeply affected by Mr. Hamleigh's death?'

'I hardly know. She seemed wonderfully calm; but as we left almost immediately after the accident I had not much opportunity of judging.'

'A sad business. A lovely woman married to a man she does not care for—and really if I were not a visitor under his roof I should be tempted to say that in my opinion no woman in her senses could care for Mr. Tregonell. But I suppose after all practical considerations had something to do with the match. Tregonell is lord of half-a-dozen manors—and the lady hadn't a sixpence. Was that it?'

'Not at all. Mrs. Tregonell has money in her own right. She was the only child of an Indian judge, and her mother was co-heiress with the late Mrs. Tregonell, who was a Miss Champernowne—I believe she has at least fifteen hundred a year, upon which a single woman might live very comfortably, don't you know,' concluded Miss Vandeleur, with a grand air.

'No doubt,' said the Baron. 'And the fortune was settled on herself, I conclude?'

'Every shilling. Mr. Tregonell's mother insisted upon that. No doubt she felt it her duty to protect her niece's interest. Mr. Tregonell has complained to Jack of his wife being so independent. It lessens his hold upon her, don't you see.'

'Naturally. She is not under any obligation to him for her milliner's bills.'

'No. And her bills must be awfully heavy this year. I never saw such a change in any one. Last autumn she dressed so simply. A tailor-gown in the morning—black velvet or satin in the evening. And now there is no end to the variety of her gowns. It makes one feel awfully shabby.'

'Such artistic toilets as yours can never be shabby,' said the Baron. 'In looking at a picture by Greuze one does not think how much a yard the pale indefinite drapery cost, one only sees the grace and beauty of the draping.'

'True; taste will go a long way,' assented Mopsy, who had been trying for the last ten years to make taste—that is to say a careful study of the West-end shop windows—do duty for cash

'Then you find Mrs. Tregonell changed since your last visit?' inquired de Cazalet, bent upon learning all he could.

'Remarkably. She is so much livelier—she seems so much more anxious to please. It is a change altogether for the better. She seems gayer—brighter—happier.'

'Yes,' thought the Baron, 'she is in love. Only one magician works such wonders, and he is the oldest of the gods—the motive power of the universe.'

The gong sounded, and they went off to lunch. At the foot of the stairs they met Christabel bringing down her boy. She was not so devoted to him as she had been last year, but there were occasions—like this wet morning, for instance—when she gave herself up to his society.

'Leo is going to eat his dinner with us,' she said, smiling at the Baron, 'if you will not think him a nuisance.'

'On the contrary, I shall be charmed to improve his acquaintance. I hope he will let me sit next him.'

'Thant,' lisped Leo,' decisively. 'Don't like oo.'

'Oh, Leo, how rude.'

'Don't reprove him,' said the Baron. 'It is a comfort to be reminded that for the first three or four years of our lives we all tell the truth. But I mean you to like me, Leo, all the same.'

'I hate 'oo,' said Leo, frankly—he always expressed himself in strong Saxon English—'but 'oo love my mamma.'

This, in a shrill childish treble, was awkward for the rest of the party. Mrs. Fairfax Torrington gave an arch glance at Mr. FitzJesse. Dopsy reddened, and exploded in a little spluttering laugh behind her napkin. Christabel looked divinely unconscious, smiling down at her boy, whose chair had been placed at the corner of the table close to his mother.

'It is a poet's privilege to worship the beautiful, Leo,' said the Baron, with a self-satisfied smirk. 'The old troubadour's right of allegiance to the loveliest—as old as chivalry.'

'And as disreputable,' said FitzJesse. 'If I had been one of the knights of old, and had found a troubadour sneaking about my premises, that troubadour's head should have been through his guitar before he knew where he was—or he should have discovered that my idea of a common chord was a halter.

But in our present age of ultra-refinement the social troubadour is a gentleman, and the worship of beauty one of the higher forms of culture.'

The Baron looked at the journalist suspiciously. Bold as he was of speech and bearing, he never ventured to cross swords with Mr. FitzJesse. He was too much afraid of seeing an article upon his Jersey antecedents or his married life in leaded type in the *Sling*.

Happily Mr. Tregonell was not at luncheon upon this particular occasion. He had gone out shooting with Jack Vandeleur and little Monty. It was supposed to be a great year for woodcock, and the Squire and his friends had been after the birds in every direction, except St. Nectan's Kieve. He had refused to go there, although it was a tradition that the place was a favourite resort of the birds.

'Why don't you shoot, Mrs. Tregonell?' asked Mrs. Torrington; 'it is just the one thing that makes life worth living in a country like this, where there is no great scope for hunting.'

'I should like roaming about the hills, but I could never bring myself to hit a bird,' answered Christabel. 'I am too fond of the feathered race. I don't know why or what it is, but there is something in a bird which appeals intensely to one's pity. I have been more sorry than I can say for a dying sparrow; and I can never teach myself to remember that birds are such wretchedly cruel and unprincipled creatures in their dealings with one another that they really deserve very little compassion from man.'

'Except that man has the responsibility of knowing better, said Mr. FitzJesse. 'That infernal cruelty of the animal creation is one of the problems that must perplex the gentle optimist who sums up his religion in a phrase of Pope's, and avows that whatever is, is right. Who, looking at the meek meditative countenance of a Jersey cow, those large stag-like eyes—Juno's eyes—would believe that Mrs. Cow is capable of trampling a sick sister to death—nay, would look upon the operation as a matter of course—a thing to be done for the good of society.'

'Is there not a little moral trampling done by stag-eyed creatures of a higher grade,' asked Mrs. Torrington. 'Let a woman once fall down in the mud, and there are plenty of her own sex ready to grind her into the mire. Cows have a coarser, more practical way of treating their fallen sisters, but the principle is the same, don't you know.'

'I have always found man the more malignant animal,' said FitzJesse. 'At her worst a woman generally has a motive for the evil she does—some wrong to avenge—some petty slight to retaliate. A man stabs for the mere pleasure of stabbing. With him slander is one of the fine arts. Depend upon it your Crabtree is a more malevolent creature than Mrs. Candour—and the Candours would not kill reputations if the Crabtrees did not admire and applaud the slaughter. For my own part I believe that if there were no men in the world, women would be almost kind to each other.'

The Baron did not enter into this discussion. He had no taste for any subject out of his own line, which was art and beauty. With character or morals he had nothing to do. He did not even pretend to listen to the discourse of the others, but amused himself with petting Leo, who sturdily repulsed his endearments. When he spoke it was to reply to Christabel's last remark.

'If you are fonder of roaming on the hills than of shooting, Mrs. Tregonell, why should we not organize a rambling party? It is not too late for a picnic. Let us hold ourselves ready for the first bright day—perhaps, after this deluge, we shall have fine weather to-morrow—and organize a pilgrimage to Tintagel, with all the freedom of pedestrians, who can choose their own company, and are not obliged to sit opposite the person they least care about in the imprisonment of a barouche or a wagonette. Walking picnics are the only picnics worth having. You are a good walker, I know, Mrs. Tregonell; and you, Mrs. Torrington, you can walk, I have no doubt.'

The widow smiled and nodded. 'Oh, yes I am good for half-a-dozen miles, or so,' she said, wondering whether she possessed a pair of boots in which she could walk, most of her boots being made rather with a view to exhibition on a fender-stool or on the step of a carriage than to locomotion. 'But I think as I am not quite so young as I was twenty years ago, I had better follow you in the pony-carriage.'

'Pony-carriage, me no pony-carriages,' exclaimed de Cazalet. 'Ours is to be a walking picnic and nothing else. If you like to meet us as we come home you can do so—but none but pedestrians shall drink our champagne or eat our salad—that salad which I shall have the honour to make for you with my own hands. Mrs. Tregonell.'

Jessie Bridgeman looked at Christabel to see if any painful memory—any thought of that other picnic at Tintagel when Angus Hamleigh was still a stranger, and the world seemed made for gladness and laughter, would disturb her smiling serenity. But there was no trace of mournful recollection in that bright beaming face which was turned in all graciousness towards the Baron, who sat caressing Leo's curls, while the boy wriggled his plump shoulders half out of his black velvet frock in palpable disgust at the caress.

'Oh! it will be too lovely—too utterly ouftish,' exclaimed Dopsy, who had lately acquired this last flower of speech—a word which might be made to mean almost anything, from the motive power which impels a billiard cue to the money that pays the player's losses at pool—a word which is a substantive or adjective according to the speaker's pleasure.

'I suppose we shall be allowed to join you,' said Mopsy, 'we are splendid walkers.'

'Of course—entry open to all weights and ages, with Mrs. Tregonell's permission.'

'Let it be your picnic, Baron, since it is your idea,' said Christabel; 'my housekeeper shall take your orders about the luncheon, and we will all consider ourselves your guests.'

'I shall expire if I am left out in the cold,' said Mrs. Torrington. 'You really must allow age the privilege of a pony-carriage. That delightful cob of Mrs. Tregonell's understands me perfectly.'

'Well, on second thoughts, you shall have the carriage,' said de Cazalet, graciously. 'The provisions can't walk. It shall be your privilege to bring them. We will have no servants. Mr. Faddie, Mr. FitzJesse, and I will do all the fetching and carrying, cork-drawing, and salad-making.'

CHAPTER XXX.

'THOU SHOULDST COME LIKE A FURY CROWNED WITH SNAKES.'

WHEN the shooting party came home to afternoon tea, Dopsy and Mopsy were both full of the picnic. The sun was sinking in lurid splendour; there was every chance of a fine day to-morrow. De Cazalet had interviewed the housekeeper, and ordered luncheon. Mopsy went about among the men like a recruiting sergeant, telling them of the picnic, and begging them to join in that festivity.

'It will be wretched for Dopsy and I'—her grammar was weak, and she had a fixed idea that 'I' was a genteeler pronoun than 'me,'—'if you don't all come,' she said to Colonel Blathwayt. 'Of course the Baron will devote himself exclusively to Mrs. Tregonell. FitzJesse will go in the pony trap with Mrs. Torrington, and they'll have vivisected everybody they know before they get there. And I can't get on a little bit with Mr. Faddie, though he is awfully nice. I feel that if I were to let him talk to me an hour at a stretch I should be obliged to go and join some Protestant sisterhood and wear thick boots and too fearful bonnets for the rest of my days.'

'And what would society do without Mopsy Vandeleur?' asked the Colonel, smiling at her. 'I should enjoy a ramble with you above all things, but a picnic is such a confoundedly infantine business. I always feel a hundred years old when I attempt to be gay and frisky before dusk—feel as if I had been dead and come back to life again, as some of the savage tribes believe. However, if it will really please you, I'll give up the birds to-morrow, and join your sports.'

'How sweet of you,' exclaimed Mopsy, with a thrilling look from under her painted lashes. 'The whole thing would be ghastly without you.'

'What's the row?' asked Leonard, turning his head upon the cushion of the easy chair in which he lolled at full length, to look up at the speakers as they stood a little way behind him.

The master of Mount Royal was sitting by one fireplace, with a table and tea-tray all to himself; while Mrs. Tregonell and her circle were grouped about the hearth at the opposite end of the hall. Jack Vandeleur and little Monty stood in front of the fire near their host, faithful adherents to the friend who fed them; but all the rest of the party clustered round Christabel.

Mopsy told Mr. Tregonell all about the intended picnic.

'It is to be the Baron's affair,' she said, gaily. 'He organized it, and he is to play the host. There are to be no carriages—except the pony-trap for Mrs. Torrington, who pinches her feet and her waist to a degree that makes locomotion impossible. We are all to walk except her. And I believe we are to have tea at the farm by St. Piran's well—a simple farmhouse tea in some dear old whitewashed room with a huge fireplace, hams and onions and things hanging from the rafters. Isn't it a lovely idea?'

'Very,' grumbled Leonard; 'but I should say you could have your tea a great deal more comfortable here without being under an obligation to the farm people.'

'Oh, but we have our tea here every afternoon,' said Mopsy. 'Think of the novelty of the thing.'

'No doubt. And this picnic is the Baron's idea!'

'His and Mrs. Tregonell's, they planned it all between them. And they are going to get up private theatricals for your birthday.'

'How kind,' growled Leonard, scowling at his teacup.

'Isn't it sweet of them? They are going to play "Delicate Ground." He is to be Citizen Sangfroid and she Pauline—the husband and wife who quarrel and pretend to separate and are desperately fond of each other all the time, don't you know? It's a powder piece.'

'A what?'

'A play in which the people wear powdered wigs and patches, and all that kind of thing. How dense you are.'

'I was born so, I believe. And in this powder piece Mrs. Tregonell and Baron de Cazalet are to be husband and wife, and quarrel and make friends again—eh?'

'Yes. The reconciliation is awfully fetching. But you are not jealous, are you?'

'Jealous? Not the least bit.'

'That's so nice of you; and you will come to our picnic to-morrow?'

'I think not.'

'Why not?'

'Because the woodcock season is a short one, and I want to make the best use of my time.'

'What a barbarian, to prefer any sport to our society,' exclaimed Mopsy, coquettishly. 'For my part I hate the very name of woodcock.'

'Why?' asked Leonard, looking at her keenly, with his dark, bright eyes; eyes which had that hard, glassy brightness that has always a cruel look.

'Because it reminds me of that dreadful day last year when poor Mr. Hamleigh was killed. If he had not gone out woodcock shooting he would not have been killed.'

'No; a man's death generally hinges upon something, answered Leonard, with a chilling sneer; 'no effect without a cause. But I don't think you need waste your lamentations upon Mr. Hamleigh; he did not treat your sister particularly well.'

Mopsy sighed, and was thoughtful for a moment or two. Captain Vandeleur and Mr. Montague had strolled off to change their clothes. The master of the house and Miss Vandeleur were alone at their end of the old hall. Ripples of silvery laughter, and the sound of mirthful voices came from the group about the other fireplace, where the blaze of piled-up logs went roaring up the wide windy chimney, making the most magical changeful light in which beauty or its opposite can be seen.

'No, he hardly acted fairly to poor Dopsy: he led her on, don't you know, and we both thought he meant to propose. It would have been such a splendid match for her—and I could have stayed with them sometimes.'

'Of course you could. Sometimes in your case would have meant all the year round.'

'And he was so fascinating, so handsome, ill as he looked, poor darling,' sighed Mopsy. 'I know Dop hadn't one mercenary feeling about him. It was a genuine case of spoons—she would have died for him.'

'If he had wished it; but men have not yet gone in for collecting corpses,' sneered Leonard. 'However poor the specimen of your sex may be, they prefer the living subject—even the surgeons are all coming round to that.'

'Don't be nasty,' protested Mopsy. 'I only meant to say that Dopsy really adored Angus Hamleigh for his own sake. I know how kindly you felt upon the subject—and that you wanted it to be a match.'

'Yes, I did my best,' answered Leonard. 'I brought him here, and gave you both your chance.'

'And Jack said that you spoke very sharply to Mr. Hamleigh that last night.'

'Yes, I gave him a piece of my mind. I told him that he had no right to come into my house and play fast and loose with my friend's sister.'

'How did he take it?'

'Pretty quietly.'

'You did not quarrel with him?'

'No, it could hardly be called a quarrel. We were both too reasonable—understood each other too thoroughly,' answered Leonard, as he got up and went off to his dressing-room, leaving Mopsy sorely perplexed by an indescribable something in his tone and manner. Surely there must be some fatal meaning in that dark evil smile, which changed to so black a frown, and that deep sigh which seemed wrung from the very heart of the man: a man whom Mopsy had hitherto believed to be somewhat poorly furnished with that organ, taken in its poetical significance as a thing that throbs with love and pity.

Alone in his dressing-room the lord of the Manor sat down in front of the fire with his boots on the hob, to muse upon the incongruity of his present position in his own house. A year ago he had ruled supreme, sovereign master of the domestic circle, obeyed and ministered to in all humility by a lovely and pure-minded wife. Now he was a cipher in his own house, the husband of a woman who was almost as strange to him as if he had seen her face for the first time on his return from South America. This beautiful brilliant creature, who held him at arm's length, defied him openly with looks and tones in which his guilty soul recognized a terrible meaning—looks and tones which he dare not challenge—this woman who lived only for pleasure, fine dress, frivolity, who had given his house the free-and-easy air of a mess-room, or a club—could this be indeed the woman he had loved in her girlhood, the fair and simple-minded wife whom his mother had trained for him, teaching her all good things, withholding all knowledge of evil.

'I'm not going to stand it much longer,' he said to himself, with an oath, as he kicked the logs about upon his fire, and then got up to dress for the feast at which he always felt himself just the one guest who was not wanted.

He had been at home three weeks—it seemed an age—an age of disillusion and discontent—and he had not yet sought any explanation with Christabel. Nor yet had he dared to claim his right to be obeyed as a husband, to be treated as a friend and adviser. With a strange reluctance he put off the explanation from day to day, and in the meanwhile the aspect of life at Mount Royal was growing daily less agreeable to him. Could it be that this wife of his, whose purity and faith he had tried by the hardest test—the test of daily companionship with her first and only lover—was inclined to waver now—to play him false for so shallow a coxcomb, so tawdry a fine gentleman as Oliver de Cazalet. Not once, but many times within the past week he had asked himself that question. Could it be? He had heard strange stories—had known of queer cases of the falling away of good women from the path of virtue. He had heard of sober matrons—mothers of fair children, wives of many years—the Cornelias of their circle, staking home, husband, children, honour, good name, and troops of friends against the wild delirium of some new-born fancy, sudden, demoniac as the dance of death. The women who go wrong are not always the most likely women. It is not the trampled slave, the neglected and forlorn wife of a bad husband—but the pearl and treasure of a happy circle who takes the fatal plunge into the mire. The forlorn slave-wife stays in the dreary home and nurses her children, battles with her husband's creditors, consoles herself with church going and many prayers, fondly hoping for a future day in which Tom will find out that she is fairer and dearer than any of his false godesses, and come home repentant to the domestic hearth: while the good husband's idol, sated with legitimate worship, gives herself up all at once to the intoxication of unholy incense, and topples off her shrine. Leonard Tregonell knew that the world was full of such psychological mysteries; and yet he could hardly bring himself to believe that Christabel was one of the stuff that makes false wives, or that she could be won by such a third-rate Don Juan as the Baron de Cazalet.

The dinner was a little noisier and gayer than usual to-night. Everyone talked, laughed, told anecdotes, let off puns, more or less atrocious—except the host, who sat in his place an image of gloom. Happily Mrs. St. Aubyn was one of those stout, healthy, contented people who enjoy their dinner, and only talk about as much as is required for the assistance of digestion. She told prosy stories about her pigs and poultry—which were altogether superior, intellectually and physically, to other people's pigs and poultry—and only paused once or twice to exclaim, 'You are looking awfully tired, Mr. Tregonell. You must have overdone it to-day. Don't you take curaçoa? I always do after ice pudding. It's so comforting. Do you know at the last dinner I was at before I came here the curaçoa was ginger-brandy. Wasn't that horrid? People ought not to do such things.'

Leonard suggested in a bored voice that this might have been the butler's mistake.

'I don't think so. I believe it was actual meanness—but I shall never take liqueur at *that* house again,' said Mrs. St. Aubyn, in an injured tone.

'Are you going to this picnic to-morrow?'

'I think not. I'm afraid the walk would be too much for me—and I am not fond enough of Mrs. Torrington to enjoy two hours' *tête-à-tête* in a pony-carriage. My girls will go, of course. And I suppose you will be there,' added Mrs. St. Aubyn, with intention.

'No, Vandeleur, Monty and I are going shooting.'

'Well, if I were in your shoes and had such a pretty wife, I should not leave her to go picnicing about the world with such an attractive man as the Baron.'

Leonard gave an uneasy little laugh, meant to convey the idea of supreme security.

'I'm not jealous of de Cazalet,' he said. 'Surely you don't call him an attractive man.'

'Dangerously attractive,' replied Mrs. St. Aubyn, gazing at the distant Baron, whose florid good looks were asserting themselves at the further end of the table, on Christabel's left hand —she had Mr. St. Aubyn's grey, contented face, glistening with dinner, on her right. 'He is just the kind of man I should have fallen in love with when I was your wife's age.'

'Really,' exclaimed Leonard, incredulously. 'But I suppose after you married St. Aubyn, you left off falling in love.'

'Of course. I did not put myself in the way of temptation. I should never have encouraged such a man—handsome, accomplished, unscrupulous—as Baron de Cazalet.'

'I don't think his good looks or his unscrupulousness will make any difference to my wife,' said Leonard. 'She knows how to take care of herself.'

'No doubt. But that does not release you from the duty of taking care. You had better go to the picnic.'

'My dear Mrs. St. Aubyn, if I were to go now, after what you have just said to me, you might suppose I was jealous of de Cazalet; and that is just the one supposition I could not stand,' answered Leonard. 'It would take a dozen such fascinating men to shake my confidence in my wife: she is not an acquaintance of yesterday, remember: I have known her all my life.'

'Mrs. St. Aubyn sighed and shook her head. She was one of those stupid well-meaning women whose mission in life is to make other people uncomfortable—with the best intentions. She kept a steady look-out for the approaching misfortunes of her friends. She was the first to tell an anxious mother that her youngest boy was sickening for scarlet fever, or that her eldest girl looked consumptive. She prophesied rheumatics and bronchitis to incautious people who went out in wet weather—she held it as a fixed belief that all her friends' houses were damp. It was in vain that vexed householders protested against such a suspicion, and held forth upon the superiority of their drainage, the felt under their tiles, their air bricks, and ventilators. 'My dear, your house is damp' she would reply conclusively. 'What it would be if you had *not* taken those precautions I shudder to imagine—but I only know that I get the shivers every time I sit in your drawing-room.

To-night she was somewhat offended with Mr. Tregonell that he refused to take alarm at her friendly warning, She had made up her mind that it was her duty to speak. She had told the girls so in the course of their afternoon constitutional, a private family walk.

'If things get any worse I shall take you away,' she said, as they trudged along the lane in their waterproofs, caring very little for a soft drizzling rain, which was supposed to be good for their complexions.

'Don't, mother,' said Emily. 'Clara and I are having such a jolly time. Mrs. Tregonell is straight enough, I'm sure. She does flirt outrageously with the Baron, I admit; but an open flirtation of that kind seldom means mischief; and Mr. Tregonell is such a heavy clod-hopping fellow: his wife may be forgiven for flirting a little.'

'Mrs. Tregonell flirts more than a little,' replied Mrs. St. Aubyn. 'All I can say is, I don't like it, and I don' think it's a proper spectacle for girls.'

'Then you'd better send us back to the nursery, mother, or shut us up in a convent,' retorted the younger of the damsels. 'If you don't want us to see young married women flirt, you must keep us very close indeed.'

'If you feel uneasy about your Cochin Chinas, mother, you can go home, and leave us to follow with the pater,' said Emily. 'I've set my heart upon stopping till after Mr. Tregonell's birthday, the 14th of November, for the theatricals will be fine fun. They talk of "High Life Below Stairs" for us girls, after "Delicate Ground;" and I think we shall be able to persuade Mrs. Tregonell to wind up with a dance. What is the use of people having fine rooms if they don't know how to use them?'

'Mrs. Tregonell seems ready for anything,' sighed the matron. 'I never saw such a change in any one. Do you remember how quiet she was the summer before last, when we were here for a few days?'

CHAPTER XXXI.

'HIS LADY SMILES; DELIGHT IS IN HER FACE.'

That benevolent advice of Mrs. St. Aubyn's was not without its influence upon Leonard, lightly as he seemed to put aside the insinuation of evil. The matron's speech helped to strengthen his own doubts and fears. Other eyes than his had noted Christabel's manner of receiving the Baron's attentions—other people had been impressed by the change in her. The thing was not an evil of his own imagining. She was making herself the talk of his friends and acquaintance. There was scandal—foul suspicion in the very atmosphere she breathed. That mutual understanding, that face to face arraignment, which he felt must come sooner or later, could not be staved off much longer. The wife who defied him thus openly, making light of him under his own roof, must be brought to book.

'To-morrow she and I must come to terms,' Leonard said to himself.

No one had much leisure for thought that evening. The drawing-room was a scene of babble and laughter, music, flirtation, frivolity, everybody seeming to be blest with that happy-go-lucky temperament which can extract mirth from the merest trifles. Jessie Bridgeman and Mr. Tregonell were the only lookers-on—the only two people who in Jack Vandeleur's favourite phrase were not 'in it.' Every one else was full of the private theatricals. The idea had only been mooted after luncheon, and now it seemed as if life could hardly have been bearable yesterday without this thrilling prospect. Colonel Blathwayt, who had been out shooting all the afternoon, entered vigorously into the discussion. He was an experienced amateur actor, had helped to swell the funds of half the charitable institutions of London and the provinces; so he at once assumed the function of stage manager.

'De Cazalet can act,' he said. 'I have seen him at South Kensington; but I don't think he knows the ropes as well as I do. You must let me manage the whole business for you; write to the London people for stage and scenery, lamps, costumes, wigs. And of course you will want me for Alphonse.'

Little Monty had been suggested for Alphonse. He was fair-haired and effeminate, and had just that small namby-pamby air which would suit Pauline's faint-hearted lover; but nobody dared to say anything about him when Colonel Blathwayt made this generous offer,

'Will you really play Alphonse!' exclaimed Christabel, looking up from a volume of engravings, illustrating the costumes of the Directory and Empire, over which the young ladies of the party, notably Dopsy and Mopsy, had been giggling and ejaculating. 'We should not have ventured tooffer you a secondary part.'

'You'll find it won't be a secondary character as I shall play it,' answered the Colonel, calmly. 'Alphonse will go better than any part in the piece. And now as to the costumes. Do you want to be picturesque, or do you want to be correct?'

'Picturesque by all means,' cried Mopsy. 'Dear Mrs. Tregonell would look too lovely in powder and patches.'

'Like Boucher's Pompadour,' said the Colonel. 'Do you know I think, now fancy balls are the rage, the Louis Quinze costume is rather played out. Every ponderous matron fancies herself in powder and brocade. The powder is hired for the evening, and the brocade is easily convertible into a dinner gown,' added the Colonel, who spent the greater part of his life among women, and prided himself upon knowing their ways. 'For my part, I should like to see Mrs. Tregonell dressed like Madame Tallien.'

'Undressed like Madame Tallien, you mean,' said Captain Vandeleur; and thereupon followed a lively discussion as to the costume of the close of the last century as compared with the costume of to-day, which ended in somebody's assertion that the last years of a century are apt to expire in social and political convulsions, and that there was every promise of revolution as a wind-up for the present age.

'My idea of the close of the nineteenth century is that it will be a period of dire poverty,' said the proprietor of the *Sling*; 'an age of pauperism already heralded by the sale of noble old mansions, the breaking-up of great estates, the destruction of famous collections, galleries, libraries, the pious hoards of generations of connoisseurs and book-worms, scattered to the four winds by a stroke of the auctioneer's hammer. The landed interest and the commercial classes are going down the hill together. Suez has ruined our shipping interests; an unreciprocated free trade is ruining our commerce. Coffee, tea, cotton—our markets are narrowing for all. After a period of lavish expenditure, reckless extravagance, or at any rate the affectation of reckless extravagance, there will come an era of dearth. Those are wisest who will foresee and anticipate the change, simplify their habits, reduce their luxuries, put on a Quakerish sobriety in dress and entertainments, which, if carried out nicely, may pass for high art—train themselves to a kind of holy poverty outside the cloister—and thus break their fall. Depend upon it, there will be a fall, for every one of those men and women who at this present day are living up to their incomes.'

'The voice is the voice of FitzJesse, but the words are the words of Cassandra,' said Colonel Blathwayt. 'For my part, I am like the Greeks, and never listen to such gloomy vaticinations. I dare say the deluge *will* come—a deluge now and again is inevitable; but I think the dry land will last our time. And in the meanwhile was there ever a pleasanter world than that we live in—an entirely rebuilt and revivified London—clubs, theatres, restaurants, without number—gaiety and brightness everywhere? If our amusements are frivolous, at least they are hearty. If our friendships are transient, they are very pleasant while they last. We know people to-day and cut them to-morrow; that is one of the first conditions of good society. The people who are cut understand the force of circumstances, and are just as ready to take up the running a year or two hence, when we can afford to know them.'

'Blessed are the poor in spirit,' quoted little Monty, in a meek voice.

'Our women are getting every day more like the women of the Directory and the Consulate,' continued the Colonel. 'We have come to short petticoats and gold anklets. All in good time we shall come to bare feet. We have abolished sleeves, and we have brought bodices to a *reductio ad absurdum;* but, although prudes and puritans may disapprove our present form, I must say that women were never so intelligent or so delightful. We have come back to the days of the *salon* and the *petit souper*. Our daughters are sirens and our wives are wits.'

'Charming for Colonel Blathwayt, whose only experience is of other people's wives and daughters,' said little Monty. 'But I don't feel sure that the owners are quite so happy.'

'When a man marries a pretty woman, he puts himself beyond the pale,' said Mr. FitzJesse; 'nobody sympathizes with him. I daresay there was not a member of the Grecian League who did not long to kick Menelaus.'

'There should be stringent laws for the repression of nice girls' fathers,' said little Monty. 'Could there not be some kind of institution like the Irish Land Court, to force parents to cash up, and hand over daughter and dowry to any spirited young man who made a bid? Here am I, a conspicuous martyr to parental despotism. I might have married half a dozen heiresses, but for the intervention of stony-hearted fathers. I have gone for them at all ages, from pinafores to false fronts; but I have never been so lucky as to rise an orphan.'

'Poor little Monty! But what a happy escape for the lady.'

'Ah, I should have been very kind to her, even if her youth and beauty dated before the Reform Bill,' said Mr. Montagu. 'I should not have gone into society with her—one must draw the line somewhere. But I should have been forbearing.'

'Dear Mrs. Tregonell,' said Mopsy, gushingly, 'have you made up your mind what to wear?'

Christabel had been turning the leaves of a folio abstractedly for the last ten minutes.

'To wear? Oh, for the play! Well, I suppose I must be as true to the period as I can, without imitating Madame Tallien. Baron, you draw beautifully. Will you make a sketch for my costume? I know a little woman in George Street, Hanover Square, who will carry out your idea charmingly.'

'I should have thought that you could have imagined a short-waisted gown and a pair of long mittens without the help of an artist,' said Jessie, with some acidity. She had been sitting close to the lamp, poring over a piece of point-lace work, a quiet and observant listener. It was a fixed idea among the servants at Mount Royal that Miss Bridgeman's eyes were constructed on the same principle as those of a horse, and that she could see behind her. 'There is nothing so very elaborate in the dress of that period, is there?'

'I will try to realize the poetry of the costume.'

'Oh, but the poetry means the bare feet and ankles, doesn't it!' asked Miss Bridgeman. 'When you talk about poetry in costume, you generally mean something that sets a whole roomful of people staring and tittering.'

'My Pauline will look a sylph!' said the Baron, with a languishing glance at his hostess.

And thus, in the pursuit of the infinitely little, the evening wore away. Songs and laughter, music of the lightest and most evanescent character, games which touched the confines of idiocy, and set Leonard wondering whether the evening amusements of Colney Hatch and Hanwell could possibly savour of wilder lunacy than these sports which his wife and her circle cultivated in the grave old reception-room, where a council of Cavaliers, with George Trevelyan of Nettlecombe, Royalist Colonel, at their head, had met and sworn fealty to Charles Stuart's cause, at hazard of fortune and life.

Leonard stood with his back to the wide old fire-place, watching these revellers, and speculating, in a troubled spirit, as to how much of this juvenile friskiness was real; contemplating, with a cynical spirit, that nice sense of class distinction which enabled the two St. Aubyn girls to keep Mopsy and Dopsy at an impassable distance, even while engaged with them in these familiar sports. Vain that in the Post Office game, Dopsy as Montreal exchanged places with Emily St. Aubyn as Newmarket. Montreal and Newmarket themselves are not farther apart geographically than the two damsels were morally as they skipped into each other's chairs. Vain that in the Spelling game, the South Belgravians caught up the landowner's daughters with a surpassing sharpness, and sometimes turned the laugh against those tender scions of the landed aristocracy. The very attitude of Clara St. Aubyn's chin—the way she talked apart with Mrs. Tregonell, seemingly unconscious of the Vandeleur presence, marked her inward sense of the gulf between them.

It was midnight before any one thought of going to bed, yet there was unwonted animation at nine o'clock next morning in the dining-room, where every one was talking of the day's expedition: always excepting the master of the house, who sat at one end of the table, with Termagant, his favourite Irish setter, crouched at his feet, and his game-bag lying on a chair near at hand.

'Are you really going to desert us?' asked Mopsy, with her sweetest smile.

'I am not going to desert you, for I never had the faintest intention of joining you,' answered Leonard bluntly; 'whether my wife and her friends made idiots of themselves by playing nursery games in her drawing-room, or by skipping about a windy height on the edge of the sea, is their own affair. I can take my pleasure elsewhere.'

'Yes; but you take your pleasure very sadly, as somebody said of English people generally,' urged Mopsy, whose only knowledge of polite literature was derived from the classical quotations and allusions in the *Daily Telegraph*; 'you will be all alone, for Jack and little Monty have promised to come with us.'

'I gave them perfect freedom of choice. They may like that kind of thing. I don't.'

Against so firm a resolve argument would have been vain. Mopsy gave a little sigh, and went on with her breakfast. She was really sorry for Leonard, who had been a kind and useful friend to Jack for the last six years—who had been indeed the backbone of Jack's resources, without which that gentleman's pecuniary position would have collapsed into hopeless limpness. She was quite sharp-sighted enough to see that the present aspect of affairs was obnoxious to Mr. Tregonell—that he was savagely jealous, yet dared not remonstrate with his wife.

'I should have thought he was just the last man to put up with anything of that kind,' she said to Dopsy, in their bedchamber confidences; 'I mean her carrying on with the Baron.'

'You needn't explain yourself,' retorted Dopsy, it's visible to the naked eye. If you or I were to carry on like that in another woman's house we should get turned out; but Mrs. Tregonell is in her own house, and so long as her husband doesn't see fit to complain——'

'But when will he see fit? He stands by and watches his wife's open flirtation with the Baron, and lets her go on from bad to worse. He must see that her very nature is changed since last year, and yet he makes no attempt to alter her conduct. He is an absolute worm.'

'Even the worm will turn at last. You may depend he will,' said Dopsy sententiously.

This was last night's conversation, and now in the bright fresh October morning, with a delicious coolness in the clear air, a balmy warmth in the sunshine, Dopsy and Mopsy were smiling at their hostess, for whose kindness they could not help feeling deeply grateful, whatever they might think of her conduct. They recognized a divided duty—loyalty to Leonard, as their brother's patron, and the friend who had first introduced them to this land of Beulah—gratitude to Mrs. Tregonell, without whose good graces they could not long have made their abode here.

'You are not going with us?' asked Christabel, carelessly scanning Leonard's shooting gear, as she rose from the table and drew on her long *mousquetaire* gloves.

'No—I'm going to shoot.'

'Shall you go to the Kieve? That's a good place for woodcock, don't you know?' Jessie Bridgeman stared aghast at the speaker. 'If you go that way in the afternoon you may fall in with us: we are to drink tea at the farm.'

'Perhaps I may go that way.'

'And now, if every one is ready, we had better start,' said Christabel, looking round at her party.

She wore a tight-fitting jacket, dark olive velvet, and a cloth skirt, both heavily trimmed with sable, a beaver hat, with an ostrich feather, which made a sweeping curve round the brim, and caressed the coil of golden-brown hair at the back of the small head. The costume, which was faintly suggestive of a hunting party at Fontainebleau or St. Germains, became the tall, finely-moulded figure to admiration. Nobody could doubt for an instant that Mrs. Tregonell was dressed for effect, and was determined to get full value out of her beauty. The neat tailor gown and simple little cloth toque of the past, had given way to a costly and elaborate costume, in which every detail marked the careful study of the coquette who lives only to be admired. Dopsy and Mopsy felt a natural pang of envy as they scrutinized the quality of the cloth and calculated the cost of the fur; but they consoled themselves with the conviction that there was a bewitching Kate Greenaway quaintness in their own flimsy garments which made up for the poverty of the stuff, and the doubtful finish of home dressmaking. A bunch of crimson poppies on Mopsy's shoulder, a cornflower in Dopsy's hat, made vivid gleams of colour upon their brown merino frocks, while the freshness of their saffron-tinted Toby frills was undeniable. Sleeves short and tight, and ten-buttoned Swedish gloves, made up a toilet which Dopsy and Mopsy had believed to be æsthetically perfect, until they compared it with Christabel's rich and picturesque attire. The St. Aubyn girls were not less conscious of the superiority of Mrs. Tregonell's appearance, but they were resigned to the inevitable. How could a meagre quarterly allowance, doled out by an unwilling father, stand against a wife's unlimited power of running up bills. And here was a woman who had a fortune of her own to squander as she pleased, without anybody's leave or license. Secure in the severity of slate-coloured serges made by a West-end tailor, with hats to match, and the best boots and gloves that money could buy the St. Aubyn's girls affected to despise Christabel's olive velvet and sable tails.

'It's the worst possible form to dress like that for a country ramble,' murmured Emily to Clara.

'Of course. But the country's about the only place where she could venture to wear such clothes,' replied Clara: 'she'd be laughed at in London.'

'Well, I don't know: there were some rather loud get-ups in the Park last season,' said Emily. 'It's really absurd the way married women out-dress girls.'

Once clear of the avenue, Mrs. Tregonell and her guests arranged themselves upon the Darwinian principle of natural selection.

That brilliant bird the Baron, whose velvet coat and knickerbockers were the astonishment of Boscastle, instinctively drew near to Christabel, whose velvet and sable, plumed hat, and point-lace necktie pointed her out as his proper mate—Little Monty, Bohemian and *décousu*, attached himself as naturally to one of the Vandeleur birds, shunning the iron-grey respectability of the St. Aubyn breed.

Mrs. St. Aubyn, who had made up her mind at the last to join the party, fastened herself upon St. Bernard Faddie, in the fond hope that he would be able to talk of parish matters, and advise her about her duties as Lady Bountiful; while he, on his part, only cared for rubric and ritual, and looked upon parish visitation as an inferior branch of duty, to be performed by newly-fledged curates. Mr. FitzJesse took up with Dopsy, who amused him as a marked specimen of nineteenth-century girlhood—a rare and wonderful bird of its kind, like a heavily wattled barb pigeon not beautiful, but infinitely curious. The two St. Aubyn girls, in a paucity of the male sex, had to put up with the escort of Captain Vandeleur, to whom they were extremely civil, although they studiously ignored his sisters. And so, by lane and field-path, by hill and vale, they went up to the broad, open heights above the sea—a sea that was very fair to look upon on this sunshiny autumn day, luminous with those translucent hues of amethyst and emerald, sapphire and garnet which make the ever changeful glory of that Cornish strand.

Miss Bridgeman walked half the way with the St. Aubyn girls and Captain Vandeleur. The St. Aubyns had always been civil to her, not without a certain tone of patronage which would have wounded a more self-conscious person, but which Jessie endured with perfect good temper.

'What does it matter if they have the air of bending down from a higher social level every time they talk to me,' she said to Major Bree, lightly, when he made some rude remark about these young ladies. 'If it pleases them to fancy themselves on a pinnacle, the fancy is a harmless one, and can't hurt me. I shouldn't care to occupy that kind of imaginary height myself. There must be a disagreeable sense of chilliness and remoteness; and then there is always the fear of a sudden drop; like that fall through infinite space which startles one sometimes on the edge of sleep.'

Armed with that calm philosophy which takes all small things lightly, Jessie was quite content that the Miss St. Aubyns should converse with her as if she were a creature of an inferior race—born with lesser hopes and narrower needs than theirs, and with no rights worth mention. She was content that they should be sometimes familiar and sometimes distant—that they should talk to her freely when there was no one else with whom they could talk—and that they should ignore her presence when the room was full.

To-day, Emily St. Aubyn was complaisant even to friendliness. Her sister had completely appropriated Captain Vandeleur, so Emily gave herself up to feminine gossip. There were some subjects which she really wanted to discuss with Miss Bridgeman, and this seemed a golden opportunity.

'Are we really going to have tea at the farmhouse near St Nectan's Kieve?' she asked.

'Didn't you hear Mrs. Tregonell say so?' inquired Jessie, dryly.

'I did; but I could not help wondering a little. Was it not at the Kieve that poor Mr. Hamleigh was killed?'

'Yes.'

'Don't you think it just a little heartless of Mrs. Tregonell to choose that spot for a pleasure party?'

'The farmhouse is not the Kieve: they are at least a mile apart.'

'That's a mere quibble, Miss Bridgeman: the association is just the same, and she ought to feel it.'

'Mrs. Tregonell is my very dear friend,' answered Jessie. 'She and her aunt are the only friends I have made in this world. You can't suppose that I shall find fault with her conduct?'

'No, I suppose not. You would stand by her through thick and thin?'

'Through thick and thin.'

'Even at the sacrifice of principle?'

'I should consider gratitude and friendship the governing principles of my life where she is concerned.'

'If she were to go ever so wrong, you would stand by her?'

'Stand by her, and cleave to her—walk by her side till death, wherever the path might lead. I should not encourage her in wrong-doing. I should lift up my voice when there was need: but I should never forsake her.'

'That is your idea of friendship?'

'Unquestionably. To my mind, friendship which implies anything less than that is meaningless. However, there is no need for heroics: Mrs. Tregonell is not going to put me to the test.'

'I hope not She is very sweet. I should be deeply pained if she were to go wrong. But do you know that my mother does not at all like her manner with the Baron. My sister and I are much more liberal-minded, don't you know; and we can understand that all she says and does is mere frivolity—high spirits which must find some outlet. But what surprises me is that she should be so gay and light-hearted after the dreadful events of her life. If such things had happened to me, I should inevitably have gone over to Rome, and buried myself in the severest conventual order that I could find.'

'Yes, there have been sad events in her life: but I think she chose the wiser course in doing her duty by the aunt who brought her up, than in self-immolation of that kind, answered Jessie, with her thin lips drawn to the firmest line they were capable of assuming.

'But think what she must have suffered last year when that poor man was killed. I remember meeting him at dinner when they were first engaged. Such an interesting face—the countenance of a poet. I could fancy Shelley or Keats exactly like him.'

'We have their portraits,' said Jessie, intolerant of gush. 'There is no scope for fancy.'

'But I think he really was a little like Keats—consumptive looking, too, which carried out the idea. How utterly dreadful it must have been for Mrs. Tregonell when he met his death, so suddenly, so awfully, while he was a guest under her roof. How did she bear it?'

'Very quietly. She had borne the pain of breaking her engagement for a principle, a mistaken one, as I think. His death could hardly have given her worse pain.'

'But it was such an awful death.'

'Awful in its suddenness, that is all—not more awful than the death of any one of our English soldiers who fell in Zululand the other day. After all, the mode and manner of death is only a detail, and, so long as the physical pain is not severe, an insignificant detail. The one stupendous fact for the survivor remains always the same. We had a friend and he is gone—for ever, for all we know.'

There was the faint sound of a sob in her voice as she finished speaking.

'Well all I can say is that if I were Mrs. Tregonell, I could never have been happy again,' persisted Miss St. Aubyn.

They came to Trevena soon after this, and went down the hill to the base of that lofty crag on which King Arthur's Castle stood. They found Mrs. Fairfax and the pony-carriage in the Valley. The provisions had all been carried up the ascent. Everything was ready for luncheon.

A quarter of an hour later they were all seated on the long grass and the crumbling stones, on which Christabel and her lover had sat so often in that happy season of her life when love was a new thought, and faith in the beloved one as boundless as that far-reaching ocean, on which they gazed in dreamy content. Now, instead of low talk about Arthur and Guinevere, Tristan and Iseult, and all the legends of the dim poetic past, there were loud voices and laughter, execrable puns, much conversation of the order generally known as chaff, a great deal of mild personality of that kind which, in the age of Miss Burney and Miss Austin was described as quizzing and roasting, and an all-pervading flavour of lunacy. The Baron de Cazalet tried to take advantage of the position, and to rise to poetry; but he was laughed down by the majority, especially by Mr. FitzJesse, who hadn't a good word for Arthur and his Court.

'Marc was a coward, and Tristan was a traitor and a knave,' he said. 'While as for Iseult, the less said of her the better. The legends of Arthur's birth are cleverly contrived to rehabilitate his mother's character, but the lady's reputation still is open to doubt. Jack the Giant Killer and Tom Thumb are quite the most respectable heroes connected with this western world. You have no occasion to be proud of the associations of the soil, Mrs. Tregonell.'

'But I am proud of my country, and of its legends,' answered Christabel.

'And you believe in Tristan and Iseult, and the constancy which was personified by a bramble, as in the famous ballad of Lord Lovel.'

'The constancy which proved itself by marrying somebody else, and remaining true to the old love all the same,' said Mrs. Fairfax Torrington, in her society voice, trained to detonate sharp sentences across the subdued buzz of a dinner-table.

'Poor Tristan,' sighed Dopsy.

'Poor Iseult,' murmured Mopsy.

They had never heard of either personage until this morning.

'Nothing in the life of either became them so well as the leaving it,' said Mr. FitzJesse. 'The crowning touch of poetry in Iseult's death redeems her errors. You remember how she was led half senseless to Tristan's death-chamber—*lors l'em-*

brasse de ses bras, tant comme elle peut, et gette ung souspir, et se pasme sur le corps, et le cueur lui part, et l'âme s'en va.'

'If every woman who loses her lover could die like that,' said Jessie, with a curious glance at Christabel, who sat listening smilingly to the conversation, with the Baron prostrate at her feet.

'Instead of making good her loss at the earliest opportunity, what a dreary place this world would be,' murmured little Monty. 'I think somebody in the poetic line has observed that nothing in Nature is constant, so it would be hard lines upon women if they were to be fettered for life by some early attachment that came to a bad end.'

'Look at Juliet's constancy,' said Miss St. Aubyn.

'Juliet was never put to the test,' answered FitzJesse. 'The whole course of her love affair was something less than a week. If that potion of hers had failed, and she had awakened safe and sound in her own bedchamber next morning, who knows that she would not have submitted to the force of circumstances, married County Paris, and lived happily with him ever after. There is only one perfect example of constancy in the whole realm of poetry, and that is the love of Paolo and Francesca, the love which even the pains of hell could not dissever.'

'They weren't married, don't you know,' lisped Monty. 'They hadn't had the opportunity of getting tired of each other. And then, in the under-world, a lady would be glad to take up with somebody she had known on earth: just as in Australia one is delighted to fall in with a fellow one would'nt care twopence for in Bond Street.'

'I believe you are right,' said Mr. FitzJesse, 'and that constancy is only another name for convenience. Married people are constant to each other, as a rule, because there is such an infernal row when they fall out.'

Lightly flew the moments in the balmy air, freshened by the salt sea, warmed by the glory of a meridian sun—lightly and happily for that wise majority of the revellers, whose philosophy is to get the most out of to-day's fair summer-time, and to leave future winters and possible calamities to Jove's discretion. Jessie watched the girl who had grown up by her side, whose every thought she had once known, and wondered if this beautiful artificial impersonation of society tones and society graces could be verily the same flesh and blood. What had made this wondrous transformation? Had Christabel's very soul undergone a change during that dismal period of apathy last winter? She had awakened from that catalepsy of despair a new woman—eager for frivolous pleasures—courting admiration—studious of effect: the very opposite of that high-souled and pure-minded girl whom Jessie had known and loved.

'It is the most awful moral wreck that was ever seen,' thought Jessie; 'but if my love can save her from deeper degradation she shall be saved.'

Could she care for that showy impostor posed at her feet, gazing up at her with passionate eyes—hanging on her accents—openly worshipping her? She seemed to accept his idolatry, to sanction his insolence; and all her friends looked on, half scornful, half amused.

'What can Tregonell be thinking about not to be here to-day?" said Jack Vandeleur, close to Jessie's elbow.

'Why should he be here?' she asked.

'Because he's wanted. He's neglecting that silly woman shamefully.'

'It is only his way,' answered Jessie, scornfully. 'Last year he invited Mr. Hamleigh to Mount Royal, who had been engaged to his wife a few years before. He is not given to jealousy.'

'Evidently not,' said Captain Vandeleur, waxing thoughtful, as he lighted a cigarette, and strolled slowly off to stare at the sea, the rocky pinnacles, and yonder cormorant skimming away from a sharp point, to dip and vanish in the green water.

The pilgrimage from Trevena to Trevithy farm was somewhat less straggling than the long walk by the cliffs. The way was along a high road, which necessitated less meandering, but the party still divided itself into twos and threes, and Christabel still allowed de Cazalet the privilege of a *tête-à-tête*. She was a better walker than any of her friends, and the Baron was a practised pedestrian; so those two kept well ahead, leaving the rest of the party to follow as they pleased.

'I wonder they are not tired of each other by this time,' said Mopsy, whose Wurtemburg heels were beginning to tell upon her temper. 'It has been such a long day—and such a long walk. What can the Baron find to talk about all this time?'

'Himself,' answered FitzJesse, 'an inexhaustible subject. Men can always talk. Listening is the art in which they fail. Are you a good listener, Miss Vandeleur?'

'I'm afraid not. If any one is prosy I begin to think of my frocks.'

'Very bad. As a young woman, with the conquest of society before you, I most earnestly recommend you to cultivate the listener's art. Talk just enough to develop your companion's powers. If he has a hobby, let him ride it. Be interested, be sympathetic. Do not always agree, but differ only to be convinced, argue only to be converted. Never answer at random, or stifle a yawn. Be a perfect listener, and society is open to you. People will talk of you as the most intelligent girl they know.'

Mopsy smiled a sickly smile. The agony of those ready-made boots, just a quarter of a size too small, though they had seemed so comfortable in the shoemaker's shop, was increasing momentarily. Here was a hill like the side of a house to be descended. Poor Mopsy felt as if she were balancing herself on the points of her toes. She leant feebly on her umbrella, while the editor of the *Sling* trudged sturdily by her side, admiring the landscape—

stopping half-way down the hill to point out the grander features of the scene with his bamboo. Stopping was ever so much worse than going on. It was as if the fires consuming the martyr at the stake had suddenly gone out, and left him with an acuter consciousness of his pain.

'Too, too lovely,' murmured Mopsy, heartily wishing herself in the King's Road, Chelsea, within hail of an omnibus.

She hobbled on somehow, pretending to listen to Mr. FitzJesse's conversation, but feeling that she was momentarily demonstrating her incompetence as a listener, till they came to the farm, where she was just able to totter into the sitting-room, and sink into the nearest chair.

'I'm afraid you're tired,' said the journalist, a sturdy block of a man, who hardly knew the meaning of fatigue.

'I am just a little tired,' she faltered hypocritically, 'but it has been a lovely walk.'

They were the last to arrive. The tea things were ready upon a table covered with snowy damask—a substantial tea, including home-made loaves, saffron-coloured cakes, jam, marmalade, and cream. But there was no one in the room except Mrs. Fairfax Torrington, who had enthroned herself in the most comfortable chair, by the side of the cheerful fire.

'All the rest of our people have gone straggling off to look at things,' she said, 'some to the Kieve—and as that is a mile off we shall have ever so long to wait for our tea.'

'Do you think we need wait very long?' asked Mopsy, whose head was aching from the effects of mid-day champagne; 'would it be so very bad if we were to ask for a cup of tea.'

'I am positively longing for tea,' said Mrs. Torrington to FitzJesse, ignoring Mopsy.

'Then I'll ask the farm people to brew a special pot for you two,' answered the journalist, ringing the bell. 'Here comes Mr. Tregonell, game-bag, dogs, and all. This is more friendly than I expected.'

Leonard strolled across the little quadrangular garden, and came in at the low door, as Mr. FitzJesse spoke.

'I thought I should find some of you here,' he said; 'where are the others?'

Gone to the Kieve, most of them,' answered Mrs. Torrington, briskly. Her freshness contrasted cruelly with Mopsy's limp and exhausted condition. 'At least I know your wife and de Cazalet were bent on goingthere. She had promised how the waterfall. We were just debating whether we ought to wait tea for them.'

'I wouldn't, if I were you,' said Leonard. 'No doubt they'll take their time.'

He flung down his game-bag, took up his hat, whistled to his dogs, and went towards the door.

'Won't you stop and have some tea—just to keep us in countenance?' asked Mrs. Torrington.

'No, thanks. I'd rather have it later. I'll go and meet the others.'

'If he ever intended to look after her it was certainly time he should begin,' said the widow, when the door was shut upon her host. 'Please ring again, Mr. FitzJesse. How slow these farm people are! Do they suppose we have come here to stare at cups and saucers?'

CHAPTER XXXII.

'LOVE BORE SUCH BITTER AND SUCH DEADLY FRUIT.'

LEONARD TREGONELL went slowly up the steep narrow lane with his dogs at his heels. It was a year since he had been this way. Good as the cover round about the waterfall was said to be for woodcock, he had carefully avoided the spot this season, and his friends had been constrained to defer to his superior wisdom as a son of the soil. He had gone farther afield for his sport, and, as there had been no lack of birds, his guests had no reason for complaint. Yet Jack Vandeleur had said more than once, 'I wonder you don't try the Kieve. We shot a lot of birds there last year.'

Now for the first time since that departed autumn he went up the hill to one of the happy hunting-grounds of his boyhood. The place where he had fished, and shot, and trapped birds, and hunted water-rats, and climbed and torn his clothes in the careless schoolboy days, when his conception of a perfectly blissful existence came as near as possible to the life of a North American-Indian. He had always detested polite society and book-learning; but he had been shrewd enough and quick enough at learning the arts he loved:—gunnery—angling—veterinary surgery.

He met a group of people near the top of the hill—all the party except Christabel and the Baron. One glance showed him that these two were missing from the cluster of men and women crowding through the gate that opened into the lane.

'The waterfall is quite a shabby affair,' said Miss St. Aubyn; 'there has been so little rain lately, I felt ashamed to show Mr. Faddie such a poor little dribble.'

'We are all going back to tea,' explained her mother. 'I don't know what has become of Mrs. Tregonell and the Baron, but I suppose they are loitering about somewhere. Perhaps you'll tell them we have all gone on to the farm.'

'Yes, I'll send them after you. I told my wife I'd meet her at the Kieve, if I could.'

He passed them and ran across the ploughed field, while the others went down the hill, talking and laughing. He heard the sound of their voices and that light laughter dying away on the still air as the distance widened between him and them; and he wondered if they were talking of his wife, and of his seeming indifference to her folly. The crisis had come. He had watched her in blank amazement, hardly able to believe his own senses, to realize the possibility of guilt on the part of one whose very perfection had galled him; and now he told himself there was no doubt of her folly, no doubt that this tinselly pretender had fascinated her, and that she was on the verge of destruction. No woman could outrage propriety as she had been doing of late, and yet escape danger. The business must be stopped somehow, even if he were forced to kick the Baron out of doors, in order to make an end of the entanglement. And then, what if she were to lift up her voice, and accuse him—if she were to turn that knowledge which he suspected her of possessing, against him? What then? He must face the situation, and pay the penalty of what he had done. That was all.

'It can't much matter what becomes of me,' he said to himself 'I have never had an hour's real happiness since I married her. She warned me that it would be so—warned me against my own jealous temper—but I wouldn't listen to her. I had my own way.

Could she care for that man? Could she? In spite of the coarseness of his own nature, there was in Leonard's mind a deep-rooted conviction of his wife's purity, which was stronger even than the evidence of actual facts. Even now, although the time had come when he must act, he had a strange confused feeling, like a man whose brain is under the influence of some narcotic, which makes him see things that are not. He felt as in some hideous dream—long-involved—a maze of delusion and bedevilment, from which there was no escape.

He went down into the hollow. The high wooden gate stood wide open—evidence that there was some one lingering below. The leaves were still on the trees, the broad feathery ferns were still green. There was a low yellow light gleaming behind the ridge of rock and the steep earthy slope above. The rush of the water sounded loud and clear in the silence.

Leonard crept cautiously down the winding moss-grown track, holding his dogs behind him in a leash, and constraining those well-mannered brutes to perfect quiet. He looked down into the deep hollow, through which the water runs, and over which there is that narrow foot bridge, whence the waterfall is seen in all its beauty—an arc of silvery light cleaving the dark rock above, and flashing down to the dark rock below.

Christabel was standing on the bridge, with de Cazalet at her side. They were not looking up at the waterfall. Their faces were turned the other way, to the rocky river bed, fringed with fern and wild rank growth of briar and weed. The Baron was talking earnestly, his head bent over Christabel, till it seemed to those furious eyes staring between the leafage, as if his lips must be touching her face. His hand clasped hers. That was plain enough.

Just then the spaniel stirred, and rustled the dank dead leaves—Christabel started, and looked up towards the trees that screened her husband's figure. A guilty start, a guilty look, Leonard thought. But those eyes of hers could not pierce the leafy screen, and they drooped again, looking downward at the water beneath her feet. She stood in a listening attitude, as if her whole being hung upon de Cazalet's words.

What was he pleading so intensely? What was that honeyed speech, to which the false wife listened, unresistingly, motionless as the bird spell-bound by the snake. So might Eve have listened to the first tempter. In just such an attitude, with just such an expression, every muscle relaxed, the head gently drooping, the eyelids lowered, a tender smile curving the lips—the first tempted wife might have hearkened to the silver-sweet tones of her seducer.

'Devil!' muttered Leonard between his clenched teeth.

Even in the agony of his rage—rage at finding that this open folly which he had pretended not to see, had been but the light and airy prelude to the dark theme of secret guilt—that wrong which he felt most deeply was his wife's falsehood to herself—her wilful debasement of her own noble character. He had known her, and believed in her as perfect and pure among women, and now he saw her deliberately renouncing all claim to man's respect, lowering herself to the level of the women who can be tempted. He had believed her invulnerable. It was as if Diana herself had gone astray—as if the very ideal and archetype of purity among women had beeome perverted.

He stood, breathless almost, holding back his dogs, gazing, listening with as much intensity as if only the senses of hearing and sight lived in him—and all the rest were extinct. He saw the Baron draw nearer and nearer as he urged his prayer—who could doubt the nature of that prayer—until the two figures were posed in one perfect harmonious whole, and then his arm stole gently round the slender waist.

Christabel sprang away from him with a coy laugh.

'Not now,' she said, in a clear voice, so distinct as to reach that listener's ears. 'I can answer nothing now. To-morrow.'

'But, my soul, why delay?'

'To-morrow,' she repeated; and then she cried suddenly, 'hark! there is some one close by. Did you not hear?'

There had been no sound but the waterfall—not even the faintest rustle of a leaf. The two dogs crouched submissively at their master's feet, while that master himself stood motionless as a stone figure.

'I must go,' cried Christabel. 'Think how long we have stayed behind the others. We shall set people wondering.'

She sprang lightly from the bridge to the bank, and came quickly up the rocky path, a narrow winding track, which closely skirted the spot where Leonard stood concealed by the broad leaves of a chestnut. She might almost have heard his hurried breathing, she might almost have seen the lurid eyes of his dogs, gleaming athwart the rank under-growth; but she stepped lightly past, and vanished from the watcher's sight.

De Cazalet followed.

'Christabel, stop,' he exclaimed; 'I must have your answer now. My fate hangs upon your words. You cannot mean to throw me over. I have planned everything. In three days we shall be at Pesth—secure from all pursuit.'

He was following in Christabel's track, but he was not swift enough to overtake her, being at some disadvantage upon that slippery way, where the moss-grown slabs of rock offered a very insecure footing. As he spoke the last words Christabel's figure disappeared among the trees upon the higher ground above him, and a broad herculean hand shot out of the leafy background, and pinioned him.

'Scoundrel—profligate—impostor!' hissed a voice in his ear, and Leonard Tregonell stood before him—white, panting, with flecks of foam upon his livid lips. 'Devil! you have corrupted and seduced the purest woman that ever lived. You shall answer to me—her husband—for your infamy.'

'Oh! is that your tune?' exclaimed the Baron, wrenching his arm from that iron grip. They were both powerful men—fairly matched in physical force, cool, hardened by rough living. 'Is that your game? I thought you didn't mind.'

'You dastardly villain, what did you take me for?'

'A common product of nineteenth-century civilization,' answered the other, coolly. 'One of those liberal-minded husbands who allow their wives as wide a license as they claim for themselves.'

'Liar,' cried Leonard, rushing at him with his clenched fist raised to strike.

The Baron caught him by the wrist—held him with fingers of iron.

'Take care,' he said. 'Two can play at that game. If it comes to knocking a man's front teeth down his throat I may as well tell you that I have given the 'Frisco dentists a good bit of work in my time. You forget that there's no experience of a rough-and-ready life that you have had which I have not gone through twice over. If I had you in Colorado we'd soon wipe off this little score with a brace of revolvers.'

'Let Cornwall be Colorado for the nonce. We could meet here as easily as we could meet in any quiet nook across the Channel, or in the wilds of America. No time like the present—no spot better than this.'

'If we had only the barkers,' said de Cazalet, 'but unluckily we haven't.'

'I'll meet you here to-morrow at daybreak—say, sharp seven. We can arrange about the pistols to-night. Vandeleur will come with me—he'd run any risk to serve me—and I daresay you could get little Monty to do as much for you. He's a good plucked one.'

'Do you mean it?'

'Unquestionably.'

'Very well. Tell Vandeleur what you mean, and let him settle the details. In the meantime we can take things quietly before the ladies. There is no need to scare any of them.'

'I am not going to scare them. Down, Termagant,' said Leonard to the Irish setter, as the low light branches of a neighbouring tree were suddenly stirred, and a few withered leaves drifted down from the rugged bank above the spot where the two men were standing.

'Well, I suppose you're a pretty good shot,' said the Baron, coolly, taking out his cigar-case, 'so there'll be no disparity. By-the-by there was a man killed here last year, I heard—a former rival of yours.'

'Yes, there was a man killed here,' answered Leonard, walking slowly on.

'Perhaps you killed him?'

'I did,' answered Leonard, turning upon him suddenly. 'I killed him: as I hope to kill you: as I would kill any man who tried to come between me and the woman I loved. He was a gentleman, and I am sorry for him. He fired in the air, and made me feel like a murderer. He knew how to make that last score. I have never had a peaceful moment since I saw him fall, face downward, on that broad slab of rock on the other side of the bridge. You see I am not afraid of you, or I shouldn't tell you this.'

'I suspected as much from the time I heard the story,' said de Cazalet. 'I rarely believe in those convenient accidents which so often dispose of inconvenient people. But don't you think it might be better for you if we were to choose a different spot for to-morrow's meeting? Two of your rivals settled in the same gully might look suspicious—for I daresay you intend to kill me.

'I shall try,' answered Leonard.

'Then suppose we were to meet on those sands—Trebarwith sands, I think you call the place. Not much fear of interruption there, I should think, at seven o'clock in the morning.'

'You can settle that and everything else with Vandeleur.' said Leonard, striding off with his dogs, and leaving the Baron to follow at his leisure.'

De Cazalet walked slowly back to the farm, meditating deeply.

'It's devilish unlucky that this should have happened,' he said to himself. An hour ago everything was going on velvet. We might have got quietly away to-morrow—for I know she meant to go, cleverly as she fenced with me just now—and left my gentlemen to his legal remedy, which would have secured the lady and her fortune to me, as soon as the Divorce Court business was over. He would have followed us with the idea of fighting, no doubt, but I should have known how to give him the slip. And then we should have started in life with a clean slate. Now there must be no end of a row. If I kill him it will be difficult to get away—and if I bolt, how am I to be sure of the lady? Will she come to my lure when I call her? Will she go away with me, to-morrow? Yes, that will be my only chance. I must get her to promise to meet me at Bodmin Road Station in time for the Plymouth train—there's one starts at eleven. I can drive from Trebarwith to Bodmin with a good horse, take her straight through to London, and from London by the first available express to Edinburgh. She shall know nothing of what has happened till we are in Scotland, and then I can tell her that she is a free woman, and my wife by the Scottish law,—a bond which she can make as secure as she likes by legal and religious ceremonies.'

The Baron had enough insight into the feminine character to know that a woman who has leisure for deliberation upon the verge of ruin is not very likely to make the fatal plunge. The boldly, deliberately bad are the rare exceptions among womankind. The women who err are for the most part hustled and hurried into wrong-doing—hemmed round and beset by conflicting interests—bewildered and confused by false reasoning—whirled in the Maelstrom of passion, helpless as the hunted hare.

The Baron had pleaded his cause eloquently, as he thought—had won Christabel almost to consent to elope with him—but not quite. She had seemed so near yielding, yet had not yielded. She had asked for time—time to reflect upon the fatal step—and reflection was just that one privilege which must not be allowed to her. Strange, he thought, that not once had she spoken of her son, the wrong she must inflict upon him, her agony at having to part with him. Beautiful, fascinating although he deemed her—proud as he felt at having subjugated so lovely a victim, it seemed to de Cazalet that there was something hard and desperate about her—as of a woman who went wrong deliberately and of set purpose. Yet on the brink of ruin she drew back, and was not to be moved by any special pleading of his to consent to an immediate elopement. Vainly had he argued that the time had come—that people were beginning to look askance—that her husband's suspicions might be aroused at any moment. She had been rock in her resistance of these arguments. But her consent to an early flight must now be extorted from her. Delay or hesitation now might be fatal. If he killed his man—and he had little doubt in his own mind that he should kill him—it was essential that his flight should be instant. The days were past when juries were disposed to look leniently upon gentlemanly homicide. If he were caught red-handed, the penalty of his crime would be no light one.

'I was a fool to consent to such a wild plan,' he told himself.

'I ought to have insisted upon meeting him on the other side of the Channel. But to draw back now might look bad, and would lessen my chance with her. No; there is no alternative course. I must dispose of him, and get her away, without the loss of an hour.'

The whole business had to be thought out carefully. His intent was deadly, and he planned this duel with as much wicked deliberation as if he had been planning a murder. He had lived among men who held all human life, except their own, lightly, and to whom duelling and assassination were among the possibilities of every-day existence. He thought how if he and the three other men could reach that lonely bend of the coast unobserved, they might leave the man who should fall lying on the sand, with never an indication to point how he fell.

De Cazalet felt that in Vandeleur there was a man to be trusted. He would not betray, even though his friend were left there, dead upon the low level sand-waste, for the tide to roll over him and hide him, and wrap the secret of his doom in eternal silence. There was something of the freebooter in Jack Vandeleur—an honour-among-thieves kind of spirit—which the soul of that other freebooter recognized and understood.

'We don't want little Montagu, thought de Cazalet. 'One man will be second enough to see fair-play. The fuss and formality of the thing can be dispensed with. That little beggar's ideas are too insular—he might round upon me.'

So meditating upon the details of to-morrow, the Baron went down the hill to the farm, where he found the Mount Royal party just setting out on their howeward journey under the shades of evening, stars shining faintly in the blue infinite above them. Leonard was not among his wife's guests—nor had he been seen by any of them since they met him at the field-gate, an hour ago.

'He has made tracks for home, no doubt,' said Jack Vandeleur.

They went across the fields, and by the common beyond Trevalga—walking briskly, talking merrily, in the cool evening air; all except Mopsy, from whose high-heeled boots there was no surcease of pain. Alas! those Wurtemburg heels, and the boots just half a size too small for the wearer, for how many a bitter hour of a woman's life have they to answer!

De Cazalet tried in vain during that homeward walk to get confidential speech with Christabel—he was eager to urge his new plan—the departure from Bodmin Road Station—but she was always surrounded. He fancied even that she made it her business to avoid him.

'Coquette,' he muttered to himself savagely. 'They are all alike. I thought she was a little better than the rest; but they are all ground in the same mill.'

He could scarcely get a glimpse of her face in the twilight. She was always a little way ahead, or a little way behind him—now with Jessie Bridgeman now with Emily St. Aubyn—

skimming over the rough heathy ground, flitting from group to group. When they entered the house she disappeared almost instantly, leaving her guests lingering in the hall, too tired to repair at once to their own rooms, content to loiter in the glow and warmth of the wood fires. It was seven o'clock. They had been out nearly nine hours.

'What a dreadfully long day it has been!' exclaimed Emily St. Aubyn, with a stifled yawn.

'Isn't that the usual remark after a pleasure party?' demanded Mr. FitzJesse. 'I have found the unfailing result of any elaborate arrangement for human felicity to be an abnormal lengthening of the hours; just as every strenuous endeavour to accomplish some good work for one's fellow-men infallibly provokes the enmity of the class to be benefited.'

'Oh, it has all been awfully enjoyable, don't you know,' said Miss St. Aubyn; 'and it was very sweet of Mrs. Tregonell to give us such a delightful day; but I can't help feeling as if we had been out a week. And now we have to dress for dinner, which is rather a trial.'

'Why not sit down as you are? Let us have a tailor-gown and shooting-jacket dinner, as a variety upon a calico ball,' suggested little Monty.

'Impossible! We should feel dirty and horrid,' said Miss St. Aubyn. 'The freshness and purity of the dinner-table would make us ashamed of our grubbiness. Besides, however could we face the servants? No, the effort must be made. Come, mother, you really look as if you wanted to be carried upstairs.'

'By voluntary contributions,' murmured FitzJesse, aside to Miss Bridgeman. 'Briareus himself could not do it single-handed, as one of our vivacious Home Rulers might say.'

The Baron de Cazalet did not appear in the drawing-room an hour later when the house-party assembled for dinner. He sent his hostess a little note apologizing for his absence, on the ground of important business letters, which must be answered that night; though why a man should sit down at eight o'clock in the evening to write letters for a post which would not leave Boscastle till the following afternoon, was rather difficult for any one to understand.

'All humbug about those letters, you may depend,' said little Monty, who looked as fresh as a daisy in his smooth expanse of shirt-front, with a single diamond stud in the middle of it, like a lighthouse in a calm sea. 'The Baron was fairly done—athlete as he pretends to be—hadn't a leg to stand upon—came in limping. I wouldn't mind giving long odds that he won't show till to-morrow afternoon. It's a case of gruel and bandages for the next twenty-four hours.'

Leonard came into the drawing-room just in time to give his arm to Mrs. St. Aubyn. He made himself more agreeable than usual at dinner, as it seemed to that worthy matron—talked more—laughed louder—and certainly drank more than his wont. The dinner was remarkably lively, in spite of the Baron's absence; indeed, the conversation took a new and livelier turn upon that account, for everybody had something more or less amusing to say about the absent one, stimulated and egged on with quiet malice by Mr. FitzJesse. Anecdotes were told of his self-assurance, his vanity, his pretentiousness. His pedigree was discussed, and settled for—his antecedents—his married life, were all submitted to the process of conversational vivisection.

'Rather rough on Mrs. Tregonell, isn't it?' murmured little Monty to the fair Dopsy.

'Do you think she really cares?' Dopsy asked, incredulously.

'Don't you?'

'Not a straw. She could not care for such a man as that, after being engaged to Mr. Hamleigh.'

'Hamleigh was better form, I admit—and I used to think Mrs. T. as straight as an arrow. But I confess I've been staggered lately.'

'Did you see what a calm queenly look she had all the time people were laughing at de Cazalet?' asked Dopsy. 'A woman who cared one little bit for a man could not have taken it so quietly.'

'You think she must have flamed out—said something in defence of her admirer. You forget your Tennyson, and how Guinevere "marred her friend's point with pale tranquility." Women are so deuced deep.'

'Dear Tennyson!' murmured Dopsy,' whose knowledge of the Laureate's works had not gone very far beyond 'The May Queen,' and 'The Charge of the Six Hundred.'

It was growing late in the evening when de Cazalet showed himself. The drawing-room party had been in very fair spirits without him, but it was a smaller and a quieter party than usual; for Leonard had taken Captain Vandeleur off to his own den after dinner, and Mr. Montagu had offered to play a fifty game, left-handed, against the combined strength of Dopsy and Mopsy. Christabel had been at the piano almost all the evening, playing with a breadth and grandeur which seemed to rise above her usual style. The ladies made a circle in front of the fire, with Mr. Faddie and Mr. FitzJesse, talking and laughing in a subdued tone, while those grand harmonies of Beethoven's rose and fell upon their indifferent, half admiring ears.

Christabel played the closing chords of the Funeral March of a Hero as de Cazalet entered the room. He went straight to the piano, and seated himself in the empty chair by her side. She glided into the melancholy arpeggios of the Moonlight Sonata, without looking up from the keys. They were a long way from the group at the fire—all the length of the room lay in deep shadow between the lamps on the mantelpiece and neighbouring tables, and the candles upon the piano. Pianissimo music seemed to invite conversation.

'You have written your letters?' she asked, lightly.

'My letters were a fiction—I did not want to sit face to face with your husband at dinner, after our conversation this afternoon at the waterfall; you can understand that, can't you, Christabel. Don't—don't do that.'

'What?' she asked, still looking down at the keys.

'Don't shudder when I call you by your Christian name—as you did just now. Christabel, I want your answer to my question of to-day. I told you then that the crisis of our fate had come. I tell you so again to-night—more earnestly, if it is possible to be more in earnest than I was to-day. I am obliged to speak to you here—almost within earshot of those people—because time is short, and I must take the first chance that offers. It has been my accursed luck never to be with you alone—I think this afternoon was the first time that you and I have been together alone since I came here. You don't know how hard it has been for me to keep every word and look within check—always to remember that we were before an audience.'

'Yes, there has been a good deal of acting,' she answered, quietly.

'But there must be no more acting—no more falsehood. We have both made up our minds, have we not, my beloved? I think you love me—yes, Christabel, I feel secure of your love. You did not deny it to-day, when I asked that thrilling question—those hidden eyes, the conscious droop of that proud head, were more eloquent than words. And for my love, Christabel—no words can speak that. It shall be told by-and-by in language that all the world can understand—told by my deeds. The time has come for decision; I have had news to-day that renders instant action necessary. If you and I do not leave Cornwall together to-morrow, we may be parted for ever. Have you made up your mind?'

'Hardly,' she answered, her fingers still slowly moving over the keys in those plaintive arpeggios.

'What is your difficulty, dearest? Do you fear to face the future with me?'

'I have not thought of the future.'

'Is it the idea of leaving your child that distresses you?'

'I have not thought of him.'

'Then it is my truth—my devotion which you doubt?'

'Give me a little more time for thought,' she said, still playing the same *sotto voce* accompaniment to their speech.

'I dare not; everything must be planned to-night. I must leave this house early to-morrow morning. There are imperative reasons which oblige me to do so. You must meet me at Bodmin Road Station at eleven—you must, Christabel, if our lives are to be free and happy and spent together. Vacillation on your part will ruin all my plans. Trust yourself to me, dearest—trust my power to secure a bright and happy future. If you do not want to be parted from your boy take him with you. He shall be my son. I will hold him for you against all the world.'

'You must leave this house early to-morrow morning,' she said, looking up at him for the first time. 'Why?'

'For a reason which I cannot tell you. It is a business in which some one else is involved, and I am not free to disclose it yet. You shall know all later.'

'You will tell me, when we meet at Bodmin Road.'

'Yes. Ah, then you have made up your mind—you will be there. My best and dearest, Heaven bless you for that sweet consent.'

'Had we not better leave Heaven out of the question?' she said with a mocking smile; and then slowly, gravely, deliberately, she said, 'Yes, I will meet you at eleven o'clock to-morrow, at Bodmin Road Station—and you will tell me all that has happened.'

'What secret can I withhold from you, love—my second self—the fairer half of my soul?'

Urgently as he had pleaded his cause, certain as he had been of ultimate success, he was almost overcome by her yielding. It seemed as if a fortress which a moment before had stood up between him and the sky—massive—invincible—the very type of the impregnable and everlasting, had suddenly crumbled into ruin at his feet. His belief in woman's pride and purity had never been very strong: yet he had believed that here and there, in this sinful world, invincible purity was to be found. But now he could never believe in any woman again. He had believed in this one to the last, although he had set himself to win her. Even when he had been breathing the poison of his florid eloquence into her ear—even when she had smiled at him, a willing listener—there had been something in her look, some sublime inexpressible air of stainless womanhood which had made an impassable distance between them. And now she had consented to run away with him: she had sunk in one moment to the level of all disloyal wives. His breast thrilled with pride and triumph at the thought of his conquest: and yet there was a touch of shame, shame that she could so fall.

Emily St. Aubyn came over to the piano, and made an end of all confidential talk.

'Now you are both here, do give us that delicious little duet of Lecocq's,' she said: 'we want something cheerful before we disperse. Good gracious Mrs. Tregonell, how bad you look,' cried the young lady, suddenly, 'as white as a ghost.'

'I am tired to death,' answered Christabel, 'I could not sing a note for the world.'

'Really, then we mustn't worry you. Thanks so much for that lovely Beethoven music—the "Andante"—or the "Pastorale"—or the "Pathétique," was it not? So sweet.'

'Good night,' said Christabel. 'You won't think me rude if I am the first to go?'

'Not at all. We are all going. Pack up your wools, mother I know you have only been pretending to knit. We are all half asleep. I believe we have hardly strength to crawl upstairs.'

Candles were lighted, and Mrs. Tregonell and her guests dispersed, the party from the billiard-room meeting them in the hall.

These lighter-minded people, the drama of whose existence was just now in the comedy stage, went noisily up to their rooms; but the Baron, who was usually the most loquacious, retired almost in silence. Nor did Christabel do more than bid her guests a brief good-night. Neither Leonard nor his friend Jack Vandeleur had shown themselves since dinner. Whether they were still in the Squire's den, or whether they had retired to their own rooms, no one knew.

The Baron's servant was waiting to attend his master. He was a man who had been with de Cazalet in California, Mexico, and South America—who had lived with him in his bachelorhood and in his married life—knew all the details of his domestic career, and had been faithful to him in wealth and in poverty, knew all that there was to be known about him—the best and the worst—and had made up his mind to hold by an employment which had been adventurous, profitable, and tolerably easy, not entirely free from danger, or from the prospect of adversity—yet always hopeful. So thorough a scamp as the Baron must always find some chance open to him—thus, at least, argued Henri le Mescam, his unscrupulous ally. The man was quick, clever—able to turn his hand to anything—valet, groom, cook, courier—as necessity demanded.

'Is Salathiel pretty fresh?' asked the Baron.

'Fit as a fiddle: he hasn't been out since you hunted him four days ago.'

'That's lucky. He will be able to go the pace to-morrow morning. Have him harnessed to that American buggy of Mr. Tregonell's at six o'clock.'

'I suppose you know that it's hardly light at six.'

'There will be quite enough light for me. Pack my smallest portmanteau with linen for a week, and a second suit—no dress-clothes—and have the trap ready in the stable-yard when the clock strikes six. I have to catch a train at Launceston at 7.45. You will follow in the afternoon with the luggage.'

To your London rooms, Sir?'

'Yes. If you don't find me there you will wait for further instructions. You may have to join me on the other side of the channel.'

'I hope so, Sir.'

'Sick of England, already?'

'Never cared much for it, Sir. I began to think I should die of the dulness of this place.'

'Rather more luxurious than our old quarters at St. Heliers ten years ago, when you were marker at Jewson's, while I was teaching drawing and French at the fashionable academies of the island.'

'That was bad, Sir; but luxury isn't everything in life. A man's mind goes to rust in a place of this kind.'

'Well, there will not be much rust for you in future, I believe. How would you like it if I were to take you back to the shores of the Pacific?'

'That's just what I should like, Sir. You were a king there, and I was your prime minister.'

'And I may be a king again—perhaps this time with a queen—a proud and beautiful queen.'

'Le Mescam smiled, and shrugged his shoulders:

'The queenly element was not quite wanting in the past, Sir,' he said.

'Pshaw, Henri, the ephemeral fancy of the hour. Such chance entanglements as those do not rule a man's life.'

'Perhaps not, Sir; but I know one of those chance entanglements made Lima unpleasantly warm for us; and if, after you winged Don Silvio, there hadn't been a pair of good horses waiting for us, you might never have seen the outside of Peru.'

'And if a duel was dangerous in Lima, it would be ten times more dangerous in Cornwall, would it not, Henri?'

'Of course it would, Sir. But you are not thinking of anything like a duel here—you can't be so mad as to think of it.'

'Certainly not. And now you can pack that small portmanteau, while I take a stretch. I sha'n't take off my clothes: a man who has to be up before six should never trifle with his feelings by making believe to go to bed.'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

'SHE STOOD UP IN BITTER CASE, WITH A PALE YET STEADY FACE.'

THE silence of night and slumber came down upon the world, shadow and darkness were folded round and about it. The ticking of the old eight-day clock in the hall, of the bracket clock in the corridor, and of half a dozen other time-pieces, conscientiously performing in empty rooms, took that solemn and sepulchral sound which all clocks, down to the humblest Dutchman, assume after midnight. Sleep, peace, and silence seemed to brood over all human and brute life at Mount Royal. Yet there were some who had no thought of sleep that night.

In Mr. Tregonell's dressing-room there was the light of lamp and fire, deep into the small hours. The master of the house lolled, half-dressed, in an arm-chair by the hearth; while his friend, Captain Vandeleur, in smoking-jacket and slippers lounged with his back to the chimney-piece, and a cigarette between his lips. A whisky bottle and a couple of siphons stood on a tray on the Squire's writing-table, an open pistol-case nea at hand.

'You'd better lie down for a few hours,' said Captain Vandeleur. 'I'll call you at half-past five.'

'I'd rather sit here. I may get a nap by-and-by perhaps. You can go to bed if you are tired: I shan't oversleep myself.'

'I wish you'd give up this business, Tregonell,' said his friend with unaccustomed seriousness. 'This man is a dead shot. We heard of him in Bolivia, don't you remember? A man who has spent half his life in shooting-galleries, and who has lived where life counts for very little. Why should you stake your life against his? It isn't even betting: you're good enough at big game, but you've had very little pistol practice. Even if you were to kill him, which isn't on the cards, you'd be tried fo murder; and where's the advantage of that?'

'I'll risk it,' answered Leonard, doggedly, 'I saw him with my wife's hand clasped in his—saw him with his lips close to he face—close enough for kisses—heard her promise him an answer—to-morrow. By Heaven there shall be no such to-morrow for him and for me. For one of us there shall be an end of all things.'

'I don't believe Mrs. Tregonell is capable'—began Jack, thoughtfully mumbling his cigarette.

'You've said that once before, and you needn't say it again Capable! Why, man alive, I *saw* them together. Nothing less than the evidence of my own eyes would have convinced me. I have been slow enough to believe. There is not a man or woman in this house, yourself included, who has not, in his secret soul, despised me for my slowness. And yet, now, because there is a question of a pistol-shot or two you fence round, and try to persuade me that my wife's good name is immaculate, that all which you have seen and wondered at for the last three weeks means nothing.'

'Those open flirtations seldom do mean anything,' said Jack, persuasively.

A man may belong to the hawk tribe and yet not be without certain latent instincts of compassion and good feeling.

'Perhaps not—but secret meetings do: what I saw at the Kieve to-day was conclusive. Besides, the affair is all settled—you and de Cazalet have arranged it between you. He is willing that there should be no witness but you. The whole business will rest a secret between us three; and if we get quietly down to the sands before any one is astir to see us no one else need ever know what happened there.'

'If there is bloodshed the thing must be known.'

'It will seem like accident?'

'True,' answered Vandeleur, looking at him searchingly; 'like that accident last year at the Kieve—poor Hamleigh's death. Isn't to-morrow the anniversary, by-the-by?'

'Yes—the date has come round again.'

'Dates have an awkward knack of doing that. There is a cursed mechanical regularity in life which makes a man wish himself in some savage island where there is no such thing as an almanack.' said Vandeleur, taking out another cigarette. 'If I had been Crusoe, I should never have stuck up that post. I should have been to glad to get rid of quarter-day.'

In Christabel's room at the other end of the long corridor there was only the dim light of the night-lamp, nor was there any sound, save the ticking of the clock and the crackling of the cinders in the dying fire. Yet here there was no more sleep nor peace than in the chamber of the man who was to wager his life against the life of his fellow-man in the pure light of the dawning day. Christabel stood at her window, dressed just as she had left the drawing-room, looking out at the sky and the sea, and thinking of him who, at this hour last year, was still a part of her life—perchance a watcher then as she was watching now, gazing with vaguely questioning eyes into the illimitable panorama of the heavens, worlds beyond worlds, suns and planetary systems, scattered like grains of sand over the awful desert of infinite space, innumerable, immeasurable, the infinitesimals of the astronomer, the despair of faith. Yes, a year ago and he was beneath that roof, her friend, her counsellor, if need were; for she had never trusted him so completely, never so understood and realized all the nobler qualities of his nature, as in those last days, after she had set an eternal barrier between herself and him.

She stood at the open lattice, the cold night air blowing upon her fever-heated face; her whole being absorbed not in deliberate thought, but in a kind of waking trance. Strange pictures came out of the darkness, and spread themselves before her eyes. She saw her first lover lying on the broad flat rock at St. Nectan's Kieve, face downward, shot through the heart, the water stained with the life-blood slowly oozing from his breast. And then, when that picture faded into the blackness of night, she saw her husband and Oliver de Cazalet standing opposite to each other on the broad level sands at Trebarwith, the long waves rising up behind them like a low wall of translucent green, crested with silvery whiteness. So they would stand face to face a few hours hence. From her lurking-place behind the trees and brushwood at the entrance to the Kieve she had heard the appointment made—and she knew that at seven o'clock those two were to meet, with deadliest intent. She had so planned it—a life for a life.

She had no shadow of doubt as to which of these two would fall. Three months ago on the Riffel she had seen the Baron's skill as a marksman tested—she had seen him the wonder of the crowd at those rustic sports—seen him perform feats which only a man who has reduced pistol-shooting to a science would attempt. Against this man Leonard Tregonell—good all-round sportsman as he was—could have very little chance. Leonard had always been satisfied with that moderate skilfulness which comes easily and unconsciously. He had never given time and labour to any of the arts he pursued—content to be able to hold his own among parasites and flatterers.

'A life for a life,' repeated Christabel, her lips moving dumbly, her heart throbbing heavily, as if it were beating out those awful words. 'A life for a life—the old law—the law of justice—God's own sentence against murder. The law could not touch this murderer—but there was one way by which that cruel deed might be punished, and I found it.'

The slow silent hours wore on. Christabel left the window shivering with cold, though cheeks, brow, and lips were burning. She walked up and down the room for a long while, till the very atmosphere of the room, nay, of the house itself, seemed unendurable. She felt as if she were being suffocated, and this sense of oppression became so strong that she was sorely tempted to shriek aloud, to call upon some one for rescue from that stifling vault. The feeling grew to such intensity that she flung on her hat and cloak, and went quickly down stairs to a lobby-door that opened into the garden, a little door which she had unbolted many a night after the servants had locked up the house, in order to steal out in the moonlight and among the dewy flowers, and across the dewy turf to those shrubbery walks which had such a mysterious look—half in light and half in shadow.

She closed the door behind her, and stood with the night wind blowing round her, looking up at the sky; clouds were drifting across the starry dome, and the moon, like a storm-beaten boat, seemed to be hurrying through them. The cold wind revived her, and she began to breathe more freely.

'I think I was going mad just now,' she said to herself.

And then she thought she would go out upon the hills, and down to the churchyard in the valley. On this night, of all nights, she would visit Angus Hamleigh's grave. It was long since she had seen the spot where he lay—since her return from Switzerland she had not once entered a church. Jessie had remonstrated with her gravely and urgently—but without eliciting any explanation of this falling off in one who had been hitherto so steadfastly devout.

'I don't feel inclined to go to church, Jessie,' she said, coolly; 'there is no use in discussing my feelings. I don't feel fit for church; and I am not going in order to gratify your idea of what is conventional and correct.'

'I am not thinking of this in its conventional aspect—I have always made light of conventionalities—but things must be in a bad way with you, Christabel, when you do not feel fit for church.'

'Things are in a bad way with me,' answered Christabel, with a dogged moodiness which was insurmountable. 'I never said they were good.'

This surrender of old pious habits had given Jessie more uneasiness than any other fact in Christabel's life. Her flirtation with the Baron must needs be meaningless frivolity, Jessie had thought; since it seemed hardly within the limits of possibility that a refined and pure-minded woman could have any real *penchant* for that showy adventurer; but this persistent avoidance of church meant mischief.

And now, in the deep dead-of-night silence, Christabel went on her lonely pilgrimage to her first lover's grave. Oh, happy summer day when, sitting by her side outside the Maidenhead coach, all her own through life, as it seemed, he told her how, if she had the ordering of his grave, she was to bury him in that romantic churchyard, hidden in a cleft of the hill. She had not forgotten this even amidst the horror of his fate, and had told the vicar that Mr. Hamleigh's grave must be at Minster and no otherwhere. Then had come his relations, suggesting burial-places with family associations—vaults, mausoleums, the pomp and circumstance of sepulture. But Christabel had been firm; and while the others hesitated a paper was found in the dead man's desk requesting that he might be buried at Minster.

How lonely the world seemed in this solemn pause between night and morning. Never before had Christabel been out alone at such an hour. She had travelled in the dead of the night, and had seen the vague dim night-world from the window of a railway carriage—but never until now had she walked across these solitary hills after midnight. It seemed as if for the first time in her life she were alone with the stars.

How difficult it was in her present state of mind to realize that those lights, tremulous in the deep blue vault, were worlds, and combinations of worlds—almost all of them immeasurably greater than this earth on which she trod. To her they seemed living watchers of the night—solemn, mysterious beings, looking down at her with all-understanding eyes. She had an awful feeling of their companionship as she looked up at them—a mystic sense that all her thoughts—the worst and the best of them—were being read by that galaxy of eyes.

Strangely beautiful did the hills and the sky—the indefinite shapes of the trees against the edge of the horizon, the mysterious expanse of the dark sea—seem to her in the night silence. She had no fear of any human presence, but there was an awful feeling in being, as it were, for the first time in her life alone with the immensities. Those hills and gorges, so familiar in all phases of daylight, from sunrise to after set of sun, assumed Titanic proportions in this depth of night, and were as strange to her as if she had never trodden this path before. What was the wind saying, as it came moaning and sobbing along the deep gorge through which the river ran?—what did the wind say as she crossed the narrow bridge which trembled under her light footfall? Surely there was some human meaning in that long minor wail, which burst suddenly into a wild unearthly shriek, and then died away in a low sobbing tone, as of sorrow and pain t grew dumb from sheer exhaustion, and not because there was any remission of pain or sorrow.

With that unearthly sound still following her, she went up the winding hill-side path, and then slowly descended to the darkness of the churchyard—so sunk and sheltered that it seemed like going down into a vault.

Just then the moon leapt from behind an inky cloud, and, in that ghostly light, Christabel saw the pale grey granite cross which had been erected in memory of Angus Hamleigh. It stood up in the midst of nameless mounds, and humble slate tablets, pale and glittering—an unmistakable sign of the spot where her first lover lay. Once only before to-night had she seen that monument. Absorbed in the pursuit of a Pagan scheme of vengeance she had not dared to come within the precincts of the church, where she had knelt and prayed through all the sinless years of her girlhood. To-night some wild impulse had brought her here—to-night, when that crime which she called retribution was on the point of achievement.

She went with stumbling footsteps through the long grass, across the low mounds, till she came to that beneath which Angus Hamleigh lay. She fell like a lifeless thing at the foot of the cross. Some loving hand had covered the mound of earth with primroses and violets, and there were low clambering roses all round the grave. The scent of sweetbriar was mixed with the smell of earth and grass. Some one had cared for that grave although she, who so loved the dead, had never tended it.

'Oh, my love! my love!' she sobbed, with her face upon the grass and the primrose leaves, and her arms clasping the granite; 'my murdered love—my first, last, only lover—before to-morrow's sun is down your death will be revenged, and my life will be over! I have lived only for that—only for that Angus, my love, my love!' She kissed the cold wet grass more passionately than she had ever kissed the dead face mouldering underneath it. Only to the dead—to the utterly lost and gone—is given this supreme passion—love sublimated to despair. From the living there is always something kept back—something saved and garnered for an after-gift—some reserve in the mind or the heart of the giver; but to the dead love gives all—with a wild self-abandonment which knows not restraint or measure. The wife who, while this man yet lived, had been so rigorously true to honour and duty, now poured into the deaf dead ears a reckless avowal of love—love that had never faltered, never changed—love that had renounced the lover, and had yet gone on loving to the end.

The wind came moaning out of the valley again with that sharp human cry, as of lamentation for the dead.

'Angus!' murmured Christabel, piteously, 'Angus, can you hear me?—do you know? Oh, my God! is there memory or understanding in the world where he has gone, or is it dead blank? Help me, my God! I have lost all the old illusions of faith—I have left off praying, hoping, believing—I have only thought of my dead—thought of death and of him till all the living world grew unreal to me—and God and Heaven were only like old half-forgotten dreams. Angus!'

For a long time she lay motionless, her cold hands clasping the cold stone, her lips pressed upon the soft dewy turf, her face buried in primrose leaves—then slowly, and with an effort, she raised herself upon her knees, and knelt with her arms encircling the cross—that sacred emblem which had once meant so much for her: but which, since that long blank interval last winter, seemed to have lost all meaning. One great overwhelming grief had made her a Pagan—thirsting for revenge—vindictive—crafty—stealthy as an American Indian on the trail of his deadly foe—subtle as Greek or Oriental to plan and to achieve a horrible retribution.

She looked at the inscription on the cross, legible in the moonlight, deeply cut in large Gothic letters upon the grey stone, filled in with dark crimson.

'VENGEANCE IS MINE: I WILL REPAY, SAITH THE LORD.'

Who had put that inscription upon the cross? It was not there when the monument was first put up. Christabel remembered going with Jessie to see the grave in that dim half-blank time before she went to Switzerland. Then there was nothing but a name and a date. And now, in awful distinctness, there appeared those terrible words—God's own promise of retribution—the claim of the Almighty to be the sole avenger of human wrongs.

And she, reared by a religious woman, brought up in the love and fear of God, had ignored that sublime and awful attribute of the Supreme. She had not been content to leave her lover's death to the Great Avenger. She had brooded on his dark fate, until out of the gloom of despair there had arisen the image of a crafty and bloody retribution. 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.' So runs the dreadful sentence of an older law. The new, lovelier law, which began in the after-glow of Philosophy, the dawn of Christianity, bids man leave revenge to God. And she, who had once called herself a Christian, had planned and plotted, making herself the secret avenger of a criminal who had escaped the grip of the law.

'Must he lie in his grave, unavenged, until the Day of Judgment?' she asked herself. 'God's vengeance is slow.'

An hour later, and Christabel, pale and exhausted, her garments heavy with dew, was kneeling by her boy's bed in the faint light of the night-lamp; kneeling by him as she had knelt a year ago, but never since her return from Switzerland—praying as she had not prayed since Angus Hamleigh's death. After those long, passionate prayers, she rose and looked at the slumberer's face—her husband's face in little—but oh! how pure and fresh and radiant. God keep him from boyhood's sins of self-love and self-indulgence—from manhood's evil passions.

hatred and jealousy. All her life to come seemed too little to be devoted to watching and guarding this beloved from the encircling snares and dangers of life. Pure and innocent now in this fair dawn of infancy, he nestled in her arms—he clung to her and believed in her. What business had she with any other fears, desires, or hopes—God having given her the sacred duties of maternity—the master-passion of motherly love?

'I have been mad!' she said to herself; 'I have been living in a ghastly dream: but God has awakened me—God's word has cured me.'

God's word had come to her at the crisis of her life. A month ago, while her scheme of vengeance seemed still far from fulfilment, that awful sentence would hardly have struck so deeply. It was on the very verge of the abyss that those familiar words caught her; just when the natural faltering of her womanhood, upon the eve of a terrible crime, made her most sensitive to a sublime impression.

The first faint streak of day glimmered in the east, a pale cold light, livid and ghostly upon the edge of the sea yonder, white and wan upon the eastward points of rock and headland, when Jessie Bridgeman was startled from her light slumbers by a voice at her bedside. She was always an early riser, and it cost her no effort to sit up in bed, with her eyes wide open, and all her senses on the alert.

'Christabel, what is the matter? Is Leo ill?'

'No, Leo is well enough. Get up and dress yourself quickly, Jessie. I want you to come with me—on a strange errand; but it is something that must be done, and at once.'

'Christabel, you are mad.'

'No. I have been mad. I think you must know it—this is the awakening. Come, Jessie.'

Jessie had sprung out of bed, and put on slippers and dressing gown, without taking her eyes off Christabel. Presently she felt her cloak and gown.

'Why, you are wet through. Where have you been?'

'To Angus Hamleigh's grave. Who put that inscription on the cross?'

'I did. Nobody seemed to care about his grave—no one attended to it. I got to think the grave my own property, and that I might do as I liked with it.'

'But those awful words! What made you put them there?'

'I wanted the man who killed him to be reminded that there is an Avenger.'

'Wash your face and put on your clothes as fast as you can. Every moment is of consequence,' said Christabel.

She would explain nothing. Jessie urged her to take off her wet cloak, to go and change her gown and shoes; but she refused with angry impatience.

'There will be time enough for that afterwards,' she said; 'what I have to do will not take long, but it must be done at once. Pray be quick.'

Jessie struggled through her hurried toilet, and followed Christabel along the corridor, without question or exclamation. They went to the door of Baron de Cazalet's room. A light shone under the bottom of the door, and there was the sound of someone stirring within. Christabel knocked, and the door was opened almost instantly by the Baron himself.

'Is it the trap?' he asked. 'It's an hour too soon.'

'No, it is I, Monsieur de Cazalet. May I come in for a few minutes? I have something to tell you.'

Christabel—my——' He stopped in the midst of that eager exclamation, at sight of the other figure in the back-ground.

He was dressed for the day—carefully dressed, like a man who in a crisis of his life wishes to appear at no disadvantage. His pistol-case stood ready on the table. A pair of candles, burnt low in the sockets of the old silver candlesticks, and a heap of charred and torn paper in the fender showed that the Baron had been getting rid of superfluous documents. Christabel went into the room, followed by Jessie, the Baron staring at them both, in blank amazement. He drew an arm-chair near the expiring fire, and Christabel sank into it, exhausted and half fainting.

'What does it all mean?' asked de Cazalet, looking at Jessie, 'and why are you here with her?'

'Why is she here?' asked Jessie. 'There can be no reason except——'

She touched her forehead lightly with the tips of her fingers. Christabel saw the action.

'No, I am not mad, now,' she said; 'I believe I have been mad, but that is all over. Monsieur de Cazalet, you and my husband are to fight a duel this morning, on Trebarwith sands.'

'My dear Mrs. Tregonell, what a strange notion!'

'Don't take the trouble to deny anything. I overheard your conversation yesterday afternoon. I know everything.'

'Would it not have been better to keep the knowledge to yourself, and to remember your promise to me, last night?'

'Yes, I remember that promise. I said I would meet you at Bodmin Road, after you had shot my husband.'

'There was not a word about shooting your husband.'

'No; but the fact was in our minds, all the same—in yours as well as in mine. Only there was one difference between us. You thought that when you had killed Leonard I would run away with you. That was to be your recompense for murder. I meant that you should kill him, but that you should never see my face again. You would have served my purpose—you would have been the instrument of my revenge!'

'Christabel!'

'Do not call me by that name—I am nothing to you—I never could, under any possible phase of circumstances, be any nearer to you than I am at this moment. From first to last I have been acting a part. When I saw you at that shooting match, on the Riffel, I said to myself, "Here is a man, who in any encounter with my husband, must be fatal." My husband killed the only man I ever loved, in a duel, without witnesses—a duel forced upon him by insane and causeless jealousy. Whether that meeting was fair or unfair in its actual details, I cannot tell; but at the best it was more like a murder than a duel. When, through Miss Bridgeman's acuteness, I came to understand what that meeting had been, I made up my mind to avenge Mr. Hamleigh's death. For a long time my brain was under a cloud—I could think of nothing, plan nothing. Then came clearer thoughts. and then I met you; and the scheme of my revenge flashed upon me like a suggestion direct from Satan. I knew my husband's jealous temper, and how easy it would be to fire a train *there*, and I made my plans with that view. You lent yourself very easily to my scheme.'

'Lent myself?' cried the Baron, indignantly; and then with a savage oath he said: 'I loved you, Mrs. Tregonell, and you made me believe that you loved me.'

I let you make fine speeches, and I pretended to be pleased at them,' answered Christabel, with supreme scorn. 'I think that was all.'

'No, madam, it was not all. You fooled me to the top of my bent. What, those lovely looks, those lowered accents—all meant nothing? It was all a delusion—an acted lie? You never cared for me?'

'No,' answered Christabel. 'My heart was buried with the dead. I never loved but one man, and he was murdered, as I believed—and I made up my mind to avenge his murder. "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." That sentence was in my mind always, when I thought of Leonard Tregonell. I meant you to be the executioner. And now—now—God knows how the light has come—but the God I worshipped when I was a happy sinless girl, has called me out of the deep pit of sin—called me to remorse and atonement. You must not fight this duel. You must save me from this horrible crime that I planned—save me and yourself from blood-guiltiness. You must not meet Leonard at Trebarwith.'

'And stamp myself as a cur, to oblige you: after having lent myself so simply to your scheme of vengeance, lend myself as complacently to your repentance. No, Mrs. Tregonell, that is too much to ask. I will be your bravo, if you like, since I took the part unconsciously—but I will not brand myself with the charge of cowardice—even for you.'

'You fought a duel in South America, and killed your adversary. Mr. FitzJesse told me so. Everybody knows that you are a dead shot. Who can call you a coward for refusing to shoot the man whose roof has sheltered you—who never injured you—against whom you can have no ill-will.'

'Don't be too sure of that. He is your husband. When I came to Mount Royal, I came resolved to win you.'

'Only because I had deceived you. The woman you admired was a living lie. Oh, if you could have looked into my heart only yesterday, you must have shrunk from me with loathing. When I led you on to play the seducer's part, I was plotting murder—murder which I called justice. I knew that Leonard was listening—I had so planned that he should follow us to the Kieve. I heard his stealthy footsteps, and the rustle of the boughs—you were too much engrossed to listen; but all my senses were strained, and I knew the very moment of his coming.

'It was a pity you did not let your drama come to its natural denouément,' sneered de Cazalet, furious with the first woman who had ever completely fooled him. 'When your husband was dead—for there is not much doubt as to my killing him—you and I could have come to an understanding. You must have had some gratitude. However, I am not bloodthirsty, and since Mrs. Tregonell has cheated me out of my devotion, fooled me with day-dreams of an impossible future, I don't see that I should gain much by shooting Mr. Tregonell.'

'No, there would be no good to you in that profitless bloodshed. It is I who have wronged you—I who wilfully deceived you—degrading myself in order to lure my husband into a fatal quarrel—tempting you to kill him. Forgive me, if you can—and forget this wild wicked dream. Conscience and reason came back to me beside that quiet grave to-night. What good could it do him who lies there that blood should be spilt for his sake? Monsieur de Cazalet, if you will give up all idea of this duel I will be grateful to you for the rest of my life.'

'You have treated me very cruelly,' said the Baron, taking both her hands, and looking into her eyes, half in despairing love, half in bitterest anger; 'you have fooled me as never man was fooled before, I think—tricked me—and trifled with me—and I owe you very little allegiance. If you and I were in South America I would show you very little mercy. No, my sweet one, I would make you play out the game—you should finish the drama you began—finish it in my fashion. But in this world of yours, hemmed round with conventionalities, I am obliged to let you off easily. As for your husband—well, I have exposed my life too often to the aim of a six-shooter to be called coward if I let this one opportunity slip. He is nothing to me—or I to him—since you are nothing to me. He may go—and I may go. I will leave a line to tell him that we have both been the dupes of a pretty little acted charade, devised by his wife and her friends—and instead of going to meet him at Trebarwith, I'll drive straight to Launceston, and catch the early train. Will that satisfy you, Mrs. Tregonell?'

'I thank you with all my heart and soul—you have saved me from myself.'

'You are a much better man than I thought you, Baron,' said Jessie, speaking for the first time.

She had stood by, a quiet spectator of the scene, listening intently, ready at any moment to come to Christabel's rescue, if need were—understanding, for the first time, the moving springs of conduct which had been so long a mystery to her.

'Thank you, Miss Bridgeman. I suppose you were in the plot—looked on and laughed in your sleeve, as you saw how a man of the world may be fooled by sweet words and lovely looks.'

'I knew nothing. I thought Mrs. Tregonell was possessed by the devil. If she had let you go on—if you had shot her husband—I should not have been sorry for him — for I know he killed a much better man than himself, and I am hard enough to hug the stern old law—a life for a life. But I should have been sorry for her. She is not made for such revenges.'

'And now you will be reconciled with your husband, I suppose, Mrs. Tregonell. You two will agree to forget the past, and to live happily everwards?' sneered de Cazalet, looking up from the letter which he was writing.

'No! there can be no forgetfulness for either of us. I have to do my duty to my son. I have to win God's pardon for the guilty thoughts and plans which have filled my mind so long. But I owe no duty to Mr. Tregonell. He has forfeited every claim. May I see your letter when it is finished?'

De Cazalet handed it to her without a word—a brief epistle, written in the airiest tone, ascribing all that had happened at the Kieve to a sportive plot of Mrs. Tregonell's, and taking a polite leave of the master of the house.

'When he reads that, I shall be half-way to Launceston,' he said, as Christabel gave him back the letter.

'I am deeply grateful to you, and now good-bye,' she said, gravely, offering him her hand. He pressed the cold slim hand in his, and gently raised it to his lips.

'You have used me very badly, but I shall love and honour you to the end of my days,' he said, as Christabel left him.

Jessie was following, but de Cazalet stopped her on the threshold. 'Come,' he said, 'you must give me the clue to this mystery. Surely you were in it — you, who know her so well, must have known something of this?'

'I knew nothing. I watched her with fear and wonder. After—after Mr. Hamleigh's death—she was very ill—mentally ill; she sank into a kind of apathy—not madness—but terribly near the confiness of madness. Then, suddenly, her spirits seemed to revive—she became eager for movement, amusement—an utterly different creature from her former self. She and I, who had been like sisters, seemed ever so far apart. I could not understand this new phase of her character. For a whole year she has been unlike herself—a terrible year. Thank God this morning I have seen the old Christabel again.'

Half an hour afterwards the Baron's dogcart drove out of the yard, and half an hour after his departure the Baron's letter was delivered to Leonard Tregonell, who muttered an oath as he finished reading it, and then handed it to his faithful Jack.

'What do you say to that?' he asked.

'By Jove, I knew Mrs. T—— was straight,' answered the Captain, in his unsophisticated phraseology. 'But it was a shabby trick to play you all the same. I daresay Mop and Dop were in it. Those girls are always ready for larks.'

Leonard muttered something the reverse of polite about Dop and Mop, and went straight to the stable-yard, where he cancelled his order for the trap which was to have conveyed him to Trebarwith sands, and where he heard of the Baron's departure for Launceston.

Mystified and angry, he went straight upstairs to his wife's room. All barriers were broken down now. All reticence was at an end. Plainest words, straightest measures, befitted the present state of things.

Christabel was on her knees in a recess near her bed—a recess which held a little table, with her devotional books and a prie-dieu chair. A beautiful head of the Salvator Mundi, painted on china at Munich, gave beauty and sanctity to this little oratory. She was kneeling on the prie-dieu, her arms folded on the purple velvet cushion, her head leaning forward on the folded arms, in an attitude of prostration and self-abandonment, her hair falling loosely over her white dressing-gown. She rose at Leonard's entrance, and confronted him, a ghost-like figure, deadly pale.

'Your lover has given me the slip,' he said, roughly; 'why didn't you go with him? You mean to go, I have no doubt You have both made your plans to that end—but you want to sneak away—to get clear of this country, perhaps, before people have found out what you are. Women of your stamp don't mind what scandal they create, but they like to be out of the row.'

'You are mistaken,' his wife answered, coldly, unmoved by his anger, as she had ever been untouched by his love. 'The man who left here this morning was never my lover—never could have been, had he and I lived under the same roof for years. But I intended him for the avenger of that one man whom I did love, with all my heart and soul—the man you killed.'

'What do you mean?' faltered Leonard, with a dull grey shade creeping over his face.

It had been in his mind for a long time that his secret was suspected by his wife—but this straight, sudden avowal of the fact was not the less a shock to him.

'You know what I mean. Did you not know when you came back to this house that I had fathomed your mystery—that I knew whose hand killed Angus Hamleigh. You did know it, Leonard: you must have known: for you knew that I was not a woman to fling a wife's duty to the winds, without some all-sufficient reason. You knew what kind of wife I had been for four dull, peaceful years—how honestly I had endeavoured to perform the duty which I took upon myself in loving gratitude to your dear mother. Did you believe that I could change all at once—become a heartless, empty-headed lover of pleasure—hold you, my husband, at arm's length—outrage propriety—defy opinion—without a motive so powerful, a purpose so deadly and so dear, that self-abasement, loss of good name, counted for nothing with me.'

'You are a fool,' said Leonard, doggedly. 'No one at the inquest so much as hinted at foul play. Why should *you* suspect any one?'

'For more than one good reason. First, your manner on the night before Angus Hamleigh's death—the words you and he spoke to each other at the door of his room. I asked you then if there were any quarrel between you, and you said no: but even then I did not believe you.'

'There was not much love between us. You did not expect that, did you?' asked her husband, savagely.

'You invited him to you house; you treated him as your friend. You had no cause to distrust him or me. You must have known that.'

'I knew that you loved him.'

'I had been your faithful and obedient wife.'

'Faithful and obedient; yes—a man might buy faith and obedience in any market. I knew that other man was master of your heart. Great Heaven, can I forget how I saw you that night, hanging upon his words, all your soul in your eyes.'

'We were talking of life and death. It was not his words that thrilled me; but the deep thoughts they stirred within me—thoughts of the great mystery—the life beyond the veil. Do you know what it is to speculate upon the life beyond this life, when you are talking to a man who bears the stamp of death upon his brow, who is as surely devoted to the grave as Socrates was when he talked to his friends in the prison. But why do I talk to you of these things? You cannot understand——'

'No! I am outside the pale, am I not?' sneered Leonard; 'made of a different clay from that sickly sentimental worshipper of yours, who turned to you when he had worn himself out in the worship of ballet-girls. I was not half fine enough for you, could not talk of Shakespeare and the musical glasses. Was it a pleasant sensation for me, do you think, to see you two sentimentalizing and poetizing, day after day—Beethoven here and Byron there, and all the train of maudlin modern versifiers who have made it their chief business to sap the foundations of domestic life.

'Why did you bring him into your house?'

'Why? Can't you guess? Because I wanted to know the utmost and the worst; to watch you two together; to see what venom was left in the old poison; to make sure, if I could, that you were staunch; to put you to the test.'

'God knows I never faltered throughout that ordeal,' said Christabel, solemnly. 'And yet you murdered him. You ask me how I know of that murder. Shall I tell you? You were at the Kieve that day; you did not go by the beaten track where the ploughmen must have seen you. No! you crept in by stealth the other way—clambered over the rocks—ah! you start. You wonder how I know that. You tore your coat in the scramble across the arch, and a fragment of the cloth was caught upon a bramble. I have that scrap of cloth, and I have the shooting jacket from which it was torn, under lock and key in yonder wardrobe. Now, will you deny that you were at the Kieve that day?

'No. I was there. Hamleigh met me there by appointment. You were right in your suspicion that night. We did quarrel—not about you—but about his treatment of that Vandeleur girl. I thought he had led her on—flirted with her—fooled her——'

'You thought,' ejaculated Christabel, with ineffable scorn.

'Well, I told him so, at any rate; told him that he would not have dared to treat any woman so scurvily, with her brother and her brother's friend standing by, if the good old wholesome code of honour had not gone out of fashion. I told him that forty years ago, in the duelling age, men had been shot for a smaller offence against good feeling; and then he rounded on me, and asked me if I wanted to shoot him; if I was trying to provoke a quarrel; and then—I hardly know how the thing came about—it was agreed that we should meet at the Kieve at nine o'clock next morning, both equipped as if for woodcock shooting—game bags, dogs, and all, our guns loaded with swan-shot, and that we should settle our differences face to face, in that quiet hollow, without witnesses. If either of us dropped, the thing would seem an accident, and would entail no evil consequences upon the survivor. If one of us were only wounded, why——'

'But you did not mean that,' interrupted Christabel, with flashing eyes,' 'you meant your shot to be fatal.'

'It was fatal,' muttered Leonard. 'Never mind what I meant. God knows how I felt when it was over, and that man was lying dead on the other side of the bridge. I had seen many a noble beast, with something almost human in the look of him, go down before my gun; but I had never shot a man before. Who could have thought there would have been so much difference?'

Christabel clasped her hands over her face, and drew back with an involuntary recoil, as if all the horror of that dreadful scene were being at this moment enacted before her eyes. Never had the thought of Angus Hamleigh's fate been out of her mind in all the year that was ended to-day—this day—the anniversary of his death. The image of that deed had been ever before her mental vision, beckoning her and guiding her along the pathway of revenge—a lurid light.

'You murdered him,' she said, in low, steadfast tones. 'You brought him to this house with evil intent—yes, with your mind full of hatred and malice towards him. You acted the traitor's base, hypocritical part, smiling at him and pretending friendship, while in your soul you meant murder. And then, under this pitiful mockery of a duel—a duel with a man who had never injured you, who had no resentment against you—a duel upon the shallowest, most preposterous pretence—you kill your friend and your guest—you kill him in a lonely place, with none of the safeguards of ordinary duelling ; and you have not the manhood to stand up before your fellow-men, and say, "I did it."'

'Shall I go and tell them now?' asked Leonard, his white lips tremulous with impotent rage. 'They would hang me, most likely. Perhaps that is what you want.'

'No, I never wanted that,' answered Christabel. 'For our boy's sake, for the honour of your dead mother's name, I would have saved you from a shameful death. But I wanted your life—a life for a life. That is why I tried to provoke your jealousy—why I planned that scene with the Baron yesterday. I knew that in a duel between you and him the chances were all in his favour. I had seen and heard of his skill. You fell easily into the trap I laid for you. I was behind the bushes when you challenged de Cazalet.'

'It was a plot, then. You had been plotting my death all that time. Your songs and dances, your games and folly, all meant the same thing.'

'Yes, I plotted your death as you did Angus Hamleigh's,' answered Christabel, slowly, deliberately, with steady eyes fixed on her husband's face; 'only I relented at the eleventh hour. You did not.'

Leonard stared at her in dumb amazement. This new aspect of his wife's character paralyzed his thinking powers, which had never been vigorous. He felt as if, in the midst of a smooth summer sea, he had found himself suddenly face to face with that huge wave known on this wild northern coast, which, generated by some mysterious power in the wide Atlantic, rolls on its deadly course in overwhelming might; engulphing many a craft which but a minute before was riding gaily on a summer sea.

'Yes, you have cause to look at me with horror in your eyes,' said Christabel. 'I have steeped my soul in sin ; I have plotted your death. In the purpose and pursuit of my life I have been a murderer. It is God's mercy that held me back from that black gulf. What gain would your death have been to your victim? Would he have slept more peacefully in his grave, or have awakened happier on the Judgment Day? If he had consciousness and knowledge in that dim mysterious world, he would have been sorry for the ruin of my soul—sorry for Satan's power over the woman he once loved. Last night, kneeling on his grave, these thoughts came into my mind for the first time. I think it was the fact of being near him—almost as if there was some sympathy between the living and the dead. Leonard, I know how wicked I have been. God pity and pardon me, and make me a worthy mother for my boy. For you and me there can be nothing but life-long parting.'

'Well, yes, I suppose there would not be much chance of comfort or union for us after what has happened,' said Leonard, moodily; 'ours is scarcely a case in which to kiss again with tears, as your song says. I must be content to go my way, and let you go yours. It is a pity we ever married; but that was my fault, I suppose. Have you any particular views as to your future? I shall not molest you; but I should be glad to know that the lady who bears my name is leading a reputable life.'

'I shall live with my son—for my son. You need have no fear that I shall make myself a conspicuous person in the world. I have done with life, except for him. I care very little where I live: if you want Mount Royal for yourself, I can have the old house at Penlee made comfortable for Jessie Bridgeman and me. I dare say I can be as happy at Penlee as here.'

'I don't want this house. I detest it. Do you suppose I am going to waste my life in England—or in Europe? Jack and I can start on our travels again. The world is wide enough; there are two continents on which I have never set foot. I shall start for Calcutta to-morrow, if I can, and explore the whole of India before I turn my face westwards again. I think we understand each other fully now. Stay, there is one thing: I am to see my son when, and as often as I please, I suppose.'

'I will not interfere with your rights as a father.'

'I am glad of that. And now I suppose there is no more to be said. I leave your life, my honour, in your own keeping.'

'God be with you,' she answered, solemnly, giving that parting salutation its fullest meaning.

And so, without touch of lip or hand, they parted for a lifetime.

CHAPTER XXXIV

WE HAVE DONE WITH TEARS AND TREASONS.

'I WONDER if there is any ancient crime in the Tregonell family that makes the twenty-fifth of October a fatal date;' Mopsy speculated, with a lachrymose air, on the afternoon which followed the Baron's hasty departure. 'This very day last year Mr. Hamleigh shot himself, and spoiled all our pleasure; and to-day, the Baron de Cazalet rushes away as if the house was infected, Mrs. Tregonell keeps her own room with a nervous headache, and Mr. Tregonell is going to carry off Jack to be broiled alive in some sandy waste among prowling tigers, or to catch his death of cold upon more of those horrid mountains. One might just as well have no brother.

'If he ever sent us anything from abroad we shouldn't feel his loss so keenly,' said Dopsy, in a plaintive voice, 'but he doesn't. If he were to traverse the whole of Africa we shouldn't be the richer by a single ostrich feather—and those undyed natural ostriches are such good style. South America teems with gold and jewels; Peru is a proverb; but what are *we* the better off?'

'It is rather bad form for the master of a house to start on his travels before his guests have cleared out,' remarked Mopsy.

'And an uncommonly broad hint for the guests to hasten the clearing-out process,' retorted Dopsy. 'I thought we were good here for another month—till Christmas, perhaps. Christmas at an old Cornish manor-house would have been too lovely—like one of the shilling annuals.'

'A great deal nicer,' said Mopsy, 'for you never met with a country house in a Christmas book that was not peopled with ghosts and all kind of ghastliness.

Luncheon was lively enough, albeit de Cazalet was gone, and Mrs. Tregonell was absent, and Mr. Tregonell painfully silent. The chorus of the passionless, the people for whom life means only dressing and sleeping and four meals a day, found plenty to talk about.

Jack Vandeleur was in high spirits. He rejoiced heartily at the turn which affairs had taken that morning, having from the first moment looked upon the projected meeting on Trebarwith sands as likely to be fatal to his friend, and full of peril for all concerned in the business.

He was too thorough a free-lance, prided himself too much on his personal courage and his recklessness of consequences, to offer strenuous opposition to any scheme of the kind; but he had not faced the situation without being fully aware of its danger, and he was very glad the thing had blown over without bloodshed or law-breaking. He was glad also on Mrs. Tregonell's account, very glad to now that this one woman in whose purity and honesty of purpose he had believed, had not proved herself a simulacrum, a mere phantasmagoric image of goodness and virtue. Still more did he exult at the idea of re-visiting the happy hunting-grounds of his youth, that ancient romantic world in which the youngest and most blameless years of his life had been spent. Pleasant to go back under such easy circumstances, with Leonard's purse to draw upon, to be the rich man's guide, philosopher, and friend, in a country which he knew thoroughly.

'Pray what is the cause of this abrupt departure of de Cazalet, and this sudden freak of our host's?' inquired Mrs. Torrington of her next neighbour, Mr. FitzJesse, who was calmly discussing a cutlet *à la Maintenon*, unmoved by the shrill chatter of the adjacent Dopsy. 'I hope it is nothing wrong with the drains.'

'No I am told the drainage is simply perfect.'

'People always declare as much, till typhoid fever breaks out; and then it is discovered that there is an abandoned cesspool in direct communication with one of the spare bed-rooms, or a forgotten drain-pipe under the drawing-room floor. I never believe people when they tell me their houses are wholesome. If I smell an unpleasant smell I go,' said Mrs. Torrington.

'There is often wisdom in flight,' replied the journalist; 'but I do not think this is a case of bad drainage.'

'No more do I,' returned Mrs. Torrington, dropping her voice and becoming confidential; 'of course we both perfectly understand what it all means. There has been a row between Mr. and Mrs. Tregonell, and de Cazalet has got his *congé* from the husband.

'I should have introduced him to the outside of my house three weeks ago, had I been the Squire,' said FitzJesse. 'But I believe the flirtation was harmless enough, and I have a shrewd idea it was what the thieves call a "put up" thing—done on purpose to provoke the husband.'

'Why should she want to provoke him?'

'Ah, why? That is the mystery. You know her better than I do, and must be better able to understand her motives.'

'But I don't understand her in the least,' protested Mrs. Torrington. 'She is quite a different person this year from the woman I knew last year. I thought her the most devoted wife and mother. The house was not half so nice to stay at; but it was ever so much more respectable. I had arranged with my next people—Lodway Court, near Bristol—to be with them at the end of the week; but I suppose the best thing we can all do is to go at once. There is an air of general break-up in Mr. Tregonell's hasty arrangements for an Indian tour.'

'Rather like the supper-party in Macbeth, is it not?' said FitzJesse, 'except that her ladyship is not to the fore.'

'I call it altogether uncomfortable,' exclaimed Mrs. Torrington, pettishly. "How do I know that the Lodway Court people will be able to receive me. I may be obliged to go to an hotel.'

'Heaven avert such a catastrophe.'

'It would be very inconvenient—with a maid, and no end of luggage. One is not prepared for that kind of thing when one starts on a round of visits.'

For Dopsy and Mopsy there was no such agreeable prospect as a change of scene from one 'well-found' country-house to another. To be tumbled out of this lap of luxury meant a fall into the dreariness of South Belgravia and the King's Road—long, monotonous, arid streets, with all the dust that had been ground under the feet of happy people in the London season blown about in dense clouds, for the discomforture of the outcasts who must stay in town when the season is over; sparse dinners, coals measured by the scuttle, smoky fires, worn carpets, flat beer, and the whole gamut of existence equally flat, stale and unprofitable.

Dopsy and Mopsy listened with doleful countenances to Jack's talk about the big things he and his friend were going to do in Bengal, the tigers, the wild pigs, and wild peacocks they were going to slay. Why had not Destiny made them young men, that they too might prey upon their species, and enjoy life at somebody else's expense?

'I'll tell you what,' said their brother, in the most cheerful manner. 'Of course you won't be staying here after I leave. Mrs. Tregonell will want to be alone when her husband goes. You had better go with the Squire and me as far as Southampton. He'll frank you. We can all stop at the "Duke of Cornwall" to-morrow night, and start for Southampton by an early train next morning. You can lunch with us at the "Dolphin," see us off by steamer, and go on to London afterwards.'

'That will be a ray of jollity to gild the last hour of our happiness,' said Mopsy. 'Oh how I loathe the idea of going back to those lodgings—and pa!'

'The governor is a trial, I must admit,' said Jack. 'But you see the European idea is that an ancient parent can't hang on hand too long. There's no wheeling him down to the Ganges, and leaving him to settle his account with the birds and the fishes; and even in India that kind of thing is getting out of date.'

'I wouldn't so much mind him,' said Dopsy, plaintively, 'if his habits were more human; but there are so many traits in his character—especially his winter cough—which remind one of the lower animals.'

'Poor old Pater,' sighed Jack, with a touch of feeling. *He* was not often at home. 'Would you believe it, that he was once almost a gentleman? Yes, I remember, an early period in my life when I was not ashamed to own him. But when a fellow has been travelling steadily down hill for fifteen years, his ultimate level must be uncommonly low.'

'True,' sighed Mopsy, '*we* have always tried to rise superior to our surroundings; but it has been a terrible struggle.'

"There have been summer evenings, when that wretched slavey has been out with her young man, that I have been sorely tempted to fetch the beer with my own hands—there is a jug and bottle entrance at the place where we deal—but I have suffered agonies of thirst rather than so lower myself,' said Dopsy, with the complacence of conscious heroism.

'Right you are,' said Jack, who would sooner have fetched beer in the very eye of society than gone without it; 'one must draw the line somewhere.'

'And to go from a paradise like this to such a den as that,' exclaimed Dopsy, still harping on the unloveliness of the Pimlico lodging.

'Cheer up, old girl. I daresay Mrs. T. will ask you again. She's very good-natured.'

'She has behaved like an angel to us,' answered Dopsy, 'but I can't make her out. There's a mystery somewhere.'

'There's always a skeleton in the cupboard. Don't you try to haul old Bony out,' said the philosophical Captain.

This was after luncheon, when Jack and his sisters had the billiard-room to themselves. Mr. Tregonell was in his study, making things straight with his bailiff, coachman, butler, in his usual business-like and decisive manner. Mr. FitzJesee was packing his portmanteau, meaning to sleep that night at Penzance. He was quite shrewd enough to be conscious of the tempest in the air, and was not disposed to inflict himself upon his friends in the hour of trouble, or to be bored by having to sympathize with them in their affliction.

He had studied Mrs. Tregonell closely, and he had made up his mind that conduct which was out of harmony with her character must needs be inspired by some powerful motive. He had heard the account of her first engagement—knew all about little Fishky—and he had been told the particnlars of her first lover's death. It was not difficult for so astute an observer of human nature to make out the rest of the story.

Little Monty had been invited to go as far as Southampton with the travellers. The St. Aubyns declared that home-duties had long been demanding their attention, and that they must positively leave next day.

Mr. Faddie accepted an invitation to accompany them, and spend a week at their fine old place on the other side of the county—thus, without any trouble on Christabel's part, her house was cleared for her. When she came down to luncheon next day, two or three hours after the departure of Leonard and his party, who were to spend that night at Plymouth, with some idea of an evening at the theatre on the part of Mop and Dop, she had only the St. Aubyns and Mr. Faddie to entertain. Even they were on the wing, as the carriage which was to convey them to Bodmin Road Station was ordered for three o'clock in the afternoon.

Christabel's pale calm face showed no sign of the mental strain of the last twenty-four hours. There was such a relief in having done with the false life which she had been leading in the past month; such an infinite comfort in being able to fall back on her old self; such an unspeakable relief, too, in the sense of having saved herself on the very brink of the black gulf of sin, that it was almost as if peace and gladness had returned to her soul. Once again she had sought for comfort at the one Divine source of consolation; once more she had dared to pray; and this tardy resumption of the old sweet habit of girlhood seemed like a return to some dear home from which she has been long banished. Even those who knew so little of her real character were able to see the change in her countenance.

'What a lovely expression Mrs. Tregonell has to-day!' murmured Mr. Faddie to his neighbour, Mrs. St. Aubyn, tenderly replenishing her hock glass, as a polite preliminary to filling his own. 'So soft; so Madonna-like!'

'I suppose she is rather sorry for having driven away her husband,' said Mrs. St. Aubyn, severely. 'That has sobered her.'

'There are depths in the human soul which only the confessor can sound,' answered Mr. Faddie, who would not be betrayed into saying anything uncivil about his hostess.

'Would that she might be led to pour her griefs into an ear attuned to every note in the diapason of sorrow.'

'I don't approve of confession, and I never shall bring myself to like it,' said Mrs. St. Aubyn, sturdily. 'It is un-English!'

'But your Rubric, dear lady. Surely you stand by your Rubric?'

'If you mean the small print paragraphs in my prayer book, I never read 'em,' answered the Squire's wife, bluntly. 'I hope I know my way through the Church Service without any help of that kind.

Mr. Faddie sighed at this Bœotian ignorance, and went on with his luncheon. It might be long before he partook of so gracious a meal. A woman whose Church views were so barbarous as those of Mrs. St. Aubyn, might keep a table of primitive coarseness. A Squire Westernish kind of fare might await him in the St. Aubyn mansion.

An hour later, he pressed Christabel's hand tenderly as he bade her good-bye. 'A thousand thanks for your sweet hospitality,' he murmured, gently. 'This visit has been most precious to me. It has been a privilege to be brought nearer the lives of those blessed martyrs, Saint Sergius and Saint Bacchus; to renew my acquaintance with dear Saint Mertheriana, whose life I only dimly remembered; to kneel at the rustic shrines of Saint Ulette and Saint Piran. It has been a period of mental growth, the memory of which I shall ever value.'

And then, with a grave uplifting of two fingers, and a blessing on the house, Mr. Faddie went off to his place beside Clara St. Aubyn, on the back seat of the landau which was to convey the departing guests to the Bodmin Road Station, a two hours' drive through the brisk autumn air.

And thus, like the shadowy figures in a dissolving view, Christabel's guests melted away, and she and Jessie Bridgeman stood alone in the grand old hall which had been of late so perverted from its old sober air and quiet domestic uses. Her first act as the carriage drove away was to fling one of the casements wide open.

'Open the other windows, Jessie,' she said, impetuously; 'all of them.'

'Do you know that the wind is in the east?'

'I know that it is pure and sweet, the breath of heaven blowing over hill and sea, and that it is sweeping away the tainted atmosphere of the last month, the poison of scandal, and slang, and cigarettes, and billiard-marker talk, and all that is most unlovely in life. Oh, Jessie, thank God you and I are alone together, and the play is played out.'

'Did you see your husband to-day before he left?'

'No Why should we meet any more? What can we two have to say to each other?'

'Then he left his home without a word from you,' said Jessie, with a shade of wonder.

'His home,' repeated Christabel; 'the home in which his poor mother thought it would be my lot to make his life good and happy. If she could know—but no—thank God the dead are at peace. No, Jessie, he did not go without one word from me. I wrote a few lines of farewell. I told him I had prayed to my God for power to pity and forgive him, and that pity and pardon had come to me. I implored him to make his future life one long atonement for that fatal act last year. I who had sinned so deeply had no right to take a high tone. I spoke to him as a sinner to a sinner.'

'I hope he does repent—that he will atone,' said Miss Bridgeman, gloomily. 'His life is in his own keeping. Thank God that you and I are rid of him, and can live the rest of our days in peace.

Very quietly flows the stream of life at Mount Royal now that these feverish scenes have passed into the shadow of the days that are no more. Christabel devotes herself to the rearing of her boy, lives for him, thinks for him, finds joy in his boyish pleasures, grieves for his boyish griefs, teaches him, walks with him, rides with him, watches and nurses him in every childish illness, and wonders that her life is so full of peace and sunshine. The memory of a sorrowful past can never cease to be a part of her life. All those scenes she loves best in this world, the familiar places amidst which her quiet days are spent, are haunted by one mournful shadow; but she loves the hills and sea-shore only the dearer for that spiritual presence, which follows her in the noontide and the gloaming, for ever reminding her, amidst the simple joys of the life she knows, of that unknown life where the veil shall be lifted, and the lost shall be found.

Major Bree is her devoted friend and adviser, idolizes the boy, and just manages to prevent his manliness deteriorating under the pressure of womanly indulgence and womanly fears. Jessie has refused that faithful admirer a second time, but Christabel has an idea that he means to tempt his fate again, and in the end must prevail, by sheer force of goodness and fidelity.

Kneeling by Angus Hamleigh's grave, little Leo hears from his mother's lips how the dead man loved him, and bequeathed his fortune to him. The mother endeavours to explain in simplest, clearest words how the wealth so entrusted to him should be a sacred charge, never to be turned to evil uses or squandered in self-indulgence.'

'You will try to do good when you are a man won't you, Leo?' she asks smiling down at the bright young face, which shines like a sunbeam in its childish gladness.

'Yes,' he answers, confidently. 'I'll give Uncle Jakes tobacco.'

This is his widest idea of benevolence at the present stage of development.

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